

Chapter One

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

July 9, 1996

A lean young man with round dark-rimmed glasses ran steadily along Magnolia Road. He wore baggy grey sweatpants and a dark boxing singlet. His dark thick black hair stuck out the back of a faded and sweat-stained sporting cap. His trainers didn't fit – he'd never had a pair his own size. He was rangy and he had longer hair than many of the boys. There had been a time not so long before when would have sought to be invisible to passers-by; hiding in the shadows had been well learned at Number Four Privet Drive. He was still in hiding, but no longer from the Muggles of Little Whinging.

Hermione had said on the Express that exercise would help him sleep, so he ran each day – at first for an hour, then for an hour and a half. He had started for no other reason than to keep her from berating him later, but the running did make him feel better even if it did little to ease his nights. There was a certain pleasure in the panting and gasping that came from his invisible minders as they tried to keep pace. He'd warmed to the idea of protectors, albeit reluctantly; it was the occasional sense of others that now gave him pause – the flash of black robes at the corner of his eye, the rustle of a cloak for which he couldn't account. He unpredictably changed his routes, his habits, and the times he ventured out. A new and deadly seriousness hung over everything like a fog that wouldn't lift.

He'd been more ignored by his relations than berated thus far. Uncle Vernon avoided him and Aunt Petunia regarded him with a strange sad look in her eyes. They didn't even ask that he mow or weed or plant; instead they'd taken on a service. When he'd asked about it, she had told him that he wasn't good enough at his tasks to meet the neighbourhood standard, but there had been no real malice in her voice.

Aunt Petunia sat alone at the dining table as Harry returned from his run. "Clean yourself before you set foot in my kitchen," she said.

Harry returned, "Yes, Aunt Petunia." He stopped at the first step and added, "I, er, forgot to thank you for the artwork in the bedroom."

"You like it, do you?" she asked.

"Especially the painting beside the window," he said.

There was a long pause before she said with a catch in her voice, "Dudley painted it, and all the rest. He... he's taken up the arts since last summer."

Harry was gobsmacked. "Honestly? It... it's quite nice."

"Be certain you make mention of that to your cousin," said Aunt Petunia.

"Erm... I'll do that...?" he managed.

"Run along," she said briskly. "Vernon will be expecting his dinner."

After a week, Harry was beginning to wonder whether the Dursleys had been bought off or even cursed by someone. By the time he finished his three-minute shower, dried, dressed and made his way to the kitchen, he had shaken off Aunt Petunia's odd behaviour once again. He focused solidly on the tasks ahead. Focus was good; it kept nighttime thoughts from intruding on the days.

Uncle Vernon was already an unattractive shade of puce when Harry began to place the meal. There was a crumpled letter and a torn envelope at the centre of the table. Uncle Vernon pounced on his roast; his flatware clattered loudly against the plate. Even after her food was brought out, Aunt Petunia sat with her head angled down. She picked idly at her food. Dudley was quiet; he ate quickly, efficiently. Harry took his place at the table. He started on a full serving to no complaints, as had been the case for every meal since returning from his fifth year at Hogwarts.

Not a moment after Harry sat, Uncle Vernon slammed his fist against the table. Harry flinched but Uncle Vernon's wagging index finger jabbed toward Dudley. "A qualification in bloody – effing – ART!" he

bellowed. "Imagine my pride, Petunia, that our ickle Duddydums is now qualified to become a lazy penniless queer when he grows up!"

"Here it comes..." Dudley muttered.

"Why didn't you take up knitting instead?" Uncle Vernon spat. "Turning you into a Nancy-boy, they are! What sorts of trainers tell a boy to take up art? Pathetic!" Harry squinted at the crumpled letter; it was Dudley's O-level results.

"Two hundred for each competition, five hundred a month for trainers and ring time, extra from the market for that ridiculous diet they set for you, call after call to those fools at the sport federation – it's expensive and it's a burden. The sacrifices I've made for you..." Uncle Vernon ploughed on. "Well, I won't have you throwing away my money. Do you want to be a bloody freak like the Potter boy?"

"There wasn't a single disciplinary note from Smeltings this last term, Vernon; not a note, not a call," Aunt Petunia said.

Uncle Vernon's chest puffed. "That's because our boy's finally intimidating the right people, I expect."

Dudley set down his fork. "It's because I don't throw punches outside the ring anymore," he said. "Coach Crosby –"

"– Should be struck with a knobbly stick until he acts like a man," Uncle Vernon cut him off.

"It isn't just Coach who said I needed to change. It's Mr. Melton, Mrs. Withers, and Mr. Sutterby –" Dudley started.

"Then I should have some of my old housemates come around and we'll all bring our sticks," Uncle Vernon snapped. "How Smeltings was invaded by such a pack of soft-headed –"

"They were right, the lot of them," Dudley protested. "I could be banned from the federation for getting in a scrape now that I'm registered."

“Smeltings boys mark their place in the world. It’s not a scrape when you’re marking your place,” Uncle Vernon growled.

“Let it go, Vernon,” Aunt Petunia said.

“I certainly won’t let it go! I’ll have you know I’ve called Headmaster Edgerton,” Uncle Vernon said as he wiped at his brow. “You’ll be sitting a second time for this Food and Nutrition business – stupid as it may be – and for Latin as well. Somehow you nearly passed that one. It’s not Business, but it’ll have to do. The exams are set for the first week of August.”

“I’d have done better if you hadn’t put me into competition right before the bloody exams!” Dudley snarled.

“Mind your tongue, boy!” Uncle Vernon shouted. “You’re sitting for Mechanical Drawing as well. At least you could work as a draughtsman. I’ll not have a son of mine on the dole!”

“But... but I didn’t take the course!” spluttered Dudley.

“Then you’d best start revising,” Uncle Vernon said with an entirely false smile. “If you don’t pass Mechanical Drawing and at least one of the others, then returning to Smeltings will be the least of your worries. Do we understand one another?”

“Vernon!” Aunt Petunia shouted. Dudley noticeably paled. He left the dining room and made for the cellar without a word. Harry followed him as soon as he had cleared the table, out of morbid interest in the new-and-evidently improved Dudley.

The speed bag thump-thumped as Dudley gave it a pounding. “Don’t talk to me, Dad – I’m warning you!” Dudley snapped without turning around. He gave the bag two furious shots before he brought narrowed eyes to bear on Harry.

“And what do you want – a good laugh at the ‘queer’?” Dudley grunted, moving to the heavy bag. “Take your shot, Potter.”

“He’s being a stupid git,” said Harry. “You could stay at your school or something, right? I’ll bet your mum would pay for it behind Vernon’s back.”

Dudley kept pounding away. “They’re better to you than to me this summer! If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was your hocus-pocus –” His hands fell to his sides like stones. “That bloke with the crazy eye... did he...?”

“I don’t think so,” Harry said. “I can’t explain what’s happened. You could have done better on your OWL – er, O-levels, I mean. The rest of it though... seems like all you’ve done is listen to your professors.”

Dudley sat down heavily. “Coach Crosby, he said I’d fight better if I kept it in the ring... said I needed to find something else for myself, right? So he sent me to Mrs. Withers and she said I was being who Piers and Gordon wanted me to be, not who I wanted to be. I don’t know about that, but it wasn’t getting me what I wanted, you know? So the second week back to Smeltings, Piers is pushing around this first year and the kid gives me this look and he says ‘help me’ but the words don’t come out... and so I tear Piers loose and then lay him flat. You know what happens? This first year, he says I’m his hero, and the other midgets all come ‘round to thank me for it, and this other one gives me his lunch!” He shook his head. “I didn’t take it, he gave it to me! Makes a fellow think, right? Well, Piers and Gordon, they came for me a few days after that... they shouldn’t have done that. Now they just stay clear and I’m done with them. I haven’t hit anyone else since then – ‘cept in the ring, of course. So I go back to Mrs. Withers and I ask her, what do I do now? That’s when I started painting – been doing it for a while now.”

“You’re good at it, I think,” Harry said honestly. “I don’t know if that counts for much.”

“Yeah... so everything’s hung in the small bedroom; Mum figured Dad wouldn’t bin them if he didn’t see them,” Dudley said. “Mr. Sutterby, he thinks I could probably sell some of it. He says I have a ‘gift’, whatever that’s about. Dad, he just figures I’ve gone soft in the head.” He stood up and gave the heavy bag one crushing blow after another. “I’m doing everything Coach says... I fight better now – I’m

faster on my feet, and it's like I can see what's coming... I'm going to keep my title... more than that, I hope... people like me now ... the teachers like me... girls like me more, and I expected they'd think I was a pouf... so what did I do that was so – bloody – wrong?"

Harry shrugged. "It seems like you did a lot of things right."

Dudley harrumphed, and then started his ordinary routine again – left, right, left, right. "You know those demented things...?" he asked.

Harry hesitated. "The Dementors? Yeah... I know them better than I'd like."

Dudley mumbled, "They can't come here, can they? I mean, er, that's why you stay here – isn't that it?"

"It's something like that," Harry said.

Dudley switched to staccato jabs. "This Lord Whose-its of yours, he can't come here either – right?"

Harry thought for a moment about what to say. He decided on the truth. "I don't know. I don't think so."

Dudley gave the bag a last shove, and then began to take off his gloves. "He killed everyone in Mum's family?"

"He killed my parents at any rate," Harry told him. Dudley lost his colour again; Harry thought he looked like a Dementor was within reach.

After the gloves were put away and the elastic wraps rolled, Dudley said, "I'm not that smart, you know?" Harry bit his lip as Dudley went on, "I'm smart enough to know that I don't want to get thrown out of somewhere safe from those dementle things and your Lord Nutter. I have to pass these exams."

Harry said flatly, "I'm supposed to kill him."

Dudley backed away a step. "Kill who?"

“Him. Lord Voldemort. You see, there’s this ... oh, never mind. Point is, it has to be done and I’m the one to do it,” said Harry.

“Crikey... actually kill him?” Dudley asked.

Harry nodded. It felt good to tell someone what he had to do, even if it was out of context, but he felt a wave of everything come at him – especially Sirius. He cleared his throat. “I’ve a suggestion for you... I’ll study with you for your O levels, and you teach me how to box and what to do with those weights.”

Dudley shot him a dubious look. “What good is that? You know Latin, do you?”

Harry started, “Well, wiz... that is to say, I’ve picked up a bit for casting sp... I mean, uh, not exactly. I’m a fair student, though.”

“Better sweeten the deal, then,” Dudley said. “You know how to draw?”

“Er, no... but I might have an idea on someone who does,” Harry said.

“What else?” Dudley demanded.

Harry thought for a bit, and then added, “I’ll take over the cooking and the marketing entirely from Aunt Petunia.”

“You’d get the training diet right at least – I’ll give you that – and I suppose you could revise for Food and Nutrition,” Dudley said. He quickly regained his colour and bluster. “Well, I’m well trained in the sweet science, you know, and I suppose I could show you the ropes, so to speak... how to give old Lord Whoop-dee-doo the old one-two, and all that.”

Give Voldemort ‘the old one-two’ – please! he thought. I just need to pound the stuffing out of something.

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July 28, 1996

Harry settled into his bed after a nasty bit of weight training in the cellar. He knew he should work on his summer scroll for Snape but he didn't care a whit. I'm living like a Muggle, it occurred to him, and the idea was more comfortable than he would have guessed. He'd avoided a single coherent dream about Voldemort all summer – certainly, he hadn't felt any sort of crawling about in his mind – and his studying and training and cooking and reading left little time to dwell on anything. He dreamt regularly of Sirius falling through the veil in the Department of Mysteries, the look of wonder and shock frozen on his face. Sometimes Sirius would fall through the veil over and over. Other times, Harry would dive after him and then wake up in a sweat. Even so, he hadn't once screamed in the night.

He gave a telephone call every two or three days to Arabella Figg, the Squib who lived two streets away. She passed along to the Order of the Phoenix that he was in good health and that the Dursleys were not mistreating him. That was all Dumbledore and the others really cared about, he supposed. The telephone call was a compromise, as he'd neglected to send an owl after four days on Privet Drive. Lupin had shown up in a panic with Dumbledore in tow. He had felt badly for Lupin, who looked a mess, but the sight of him had been a living reminder of the loss through the veil.

Harry had made his feelings perfectly clear – he wanted no owls, no visits, and no bother from the minders. Thus far, his wishes had been respected. He assumed that Dumbledore had held everyone back. They certainly hang on his every word, Harry grumbled to himself. Hedwig was nonplussed at having no post to carry and responded by disappearing for days at a time.

The large screech owl that chose to peck on Harry's window was thus an unwelcome surprise. It perched on the ledge and displayed a large and floridly addressed envelope. Harry took the envelope, gave over a few Knuts with a sigh, and shooed the owl away.

A scarlet and gold border formed of a capital "G" and two illuminated dragons framed the address. It didn't take him long to guess the sender. The envelope opened of its own accord when he absently

dragged a fingertip across the seal, and the parchment inside leapt into his free hand.

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Mister Harry James Potter

The Smallest Bedroom

Number Four Privet Drive

Little Whinging, Surrey

Mister Potter:

In his Last Will and Testament recorded February 16 of this year, Mister Sirius Black entrusted Gringotts Wizarding Bank with the disposition of his estate. The Trust Department has demonstrated the validity of the late Mister Black's Last Will and Testament to the satisfaction of the Contract and Administrative Services Office of the Ministry for Magic of the United Kingdom. Gringotts has paid any and all outstanding debts and tariffs and is prepared to distribute the corpus, including all remaining personal and real property, in accordance with the terms of the Will in question.

You are the principal beneficiary of the Will. Contact the Trust Department of Gringotts Wizarding Bank in order to begin execution. At the direction of the late Mister Black, Mister Dedalus Diggle, Esq. was appointed as executor and solicitor of record. You may name another solicitor if you so choose. Respond no later than the close of business on August 16.

Fliptrask

Head Goblin, Trusts and Investment Schemes

Gringotts Bank

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He tried to crumple the post but it sprang back, as flat and smooth as when it left the envelope. "Stupid letter! Stupid goblins!" he shouted.

"Shut it, boy!" Uncle Vernon bellowed from down the hall.

Harry muttered under his breath and sped down two sets of stairs to the cellar. He wrapped elastic around his hands and then pulled on Dudley's spare pair of boxing gloves. They were stuffed tightly with foam to fit Harry's smaller hands. He worked the speed bag as Dudley had shown him. Harry was a good student when he wanted to be.

He switched to the heavy bag, hitting it stoutly. Pound. I don't want your money or your things, Sirius. POUND-pound. He saw Bellatrix Lestrange, as though she were before him in the cellar. Pound-pound-POUND.

"Bitch!" he cried out. The word tasted like blood in his mouth. POUND-pound-pound-pound.

He thought about Dudley's fear of the Dementors, his fear of leaving Privet Drive. Pound-pound. He's right, of course; nowhere else is safe, not really. Pound-pound. Voldemort will come anywhere, do anything to get at me. Pound-pound-pound. He'll take away everything and everyone I've ever cared about. Pound-pound-pound. The Dursleys – well, Dudley and Aunt Petunia at any rate; they're all the family I have, and they've not been so bad this summer. Pound-pound. He'll kill Dumbledore, I suppose, if he can manage it. Pound-pound. Lupin, definitely. POUND-POUND. And Hogwarts; he'll destroy Hogwarts.

Harry felt quite odd. Pound-POUND-pound. The Order – he'll kill them all to get at me. Pound-pound. The Department of Mysteries weighed upon him. Neville. Luna, too. They were brave, the both of them, and they'll be killed for it. POUND-pound-POUND. A draft blew upon him, almost a light wind. The whole of the D.A., probably – Dean, Seamus, Katie, Alicia and Angelina...Susan Bones and MacMillan and the other Hufflepuffs, Cho and Corner and the Ravenclaws...and all the Weasleys, every last one of them. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Bill and Charlie, even Percy the Prat. POUND-POUND. And the twins. Yes, a wind definitely blew – a hot wind. And

Ginny, poor Ginny – she's already suffered Riddle once. Pound-POUND-POUND-pound.

The heat burned the sweat from him. RON! I won't let him get to Ron! I WON'T! POUND-POUND-POUND-pound. Something creaked. Harry could feel bits of ... something... flying around. His eyes squeezed shut as he pounded away. Pound-POUND-POUND. HERMIONE! NO! POUND-POUND-POUND-creak! He saw Ron beside him, bruised but defiant. Hermione was forced to her knees before Voldemort; his Death Eaters jeered and called her a worthless Mudblood and worse. The wind roared in Harry's ears. He'll kill my best friends! He'll destroy everything and everyone I've ever cared about if I don't stop him first. POUND-creak!-POUND-creak! He couldn't shake Ron and Hermione from his mind's eye. I have to kill him – I have to end this! Voldemort sneered, spoke the curse, and shot flashes of light, first red and then green. Ron was face down in a spreading pool of blood. Hermione's eyes were wide and empty. Harry shook her and she didn't stir, didn't blink; a burning rage filled him. Everything around Harry and his two oldest and dearest friends erupted into inextinguishable green fire. POUND! POUND! POUND! CRASH!

Harry gasped for breath. He reached for the wall to catch himself and instead caught the floor. There were soft bits of something beneath his hand. He looked around the room through a greenish haze, struggled to focus, and recognised the problem – no glasses. His fingertips only found more soft bits here and there. He could hear bangs and thumps, growing closer. Bumps and thumps echoed from the stairwell. His hand closed on his glasses; the frame was askew but they were otherwise undamaged.

Foam, elastic and leather were strewn all over the cellar. Remnants of Dudley's boxing gloves hung from his wrists. That wasn't the worst of it, though. The heavy bag was in five pieces. One small piece swayed crazily from the chain that had held the bag from the ceiling. Three small pieces lay about the room. The fifth and largest piece stood across the room from Harry. It was – melted? – and embedded firmly in the concrete wall.

Thump... thump... thump... THUMP... THUMP. He heard panting and wheezing. "WHAT IN BLOODY HELL IS GOING ON DOWN HERE?" His last thought as the room spun and he passed out was, Oh, well; it was too good to last.

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Harry's head slipped under the dark waves. Long white fingers clutched at his throat, slitted red eyes burned at him, and a cold laugh haunted him. He gasped for air and took in sea spray. A woman's shrill voice called out "Let go of him!" The voice was far away or perhaps right next to him. "For God's sake, let go!" Yes, the voice was definitely close. Harry raised his hands to his throat and felt thick-fingered hands.

"Look – at – my – wall! I'll dump him on the corner so his freak friends can fetch the body!" Through the rippling dark waves, Harry made out a purple face with spit bubbling at the corners of its shrieking mouth. Then there was a second pair of large hands and then – air! Fresh air seared his chest. Darkness resolved to reveal Dudley pushing Uncle Vernon back against the wall to one side of the molten punching bag.

Harry tried to speak but only managed a few raspy crackles that made him cough. There was an insistent rapping from upstairs, a loud tapping on glass. Aunt Petunia, as distressed as Harry had ever seen her, told Dudley, "Keep your father off him, however you have to do it." She hollered up the stairs, "What is that racket about? I'm coming!"

An owl hurtled down the stairs into the cellar, swooped over Harry's head and dropped a parchment envelope at his feet. It took a graceful turn and then shot back up the stairs. "OWLS! AAAHHHH!" shrieked Uncle Vernon; he slid slowly down the cellar wall onto his ample backside. Harry tore at the envelope and wondered what sort of punishment the Ministry for Magic dispensed to underage wizards who destroyed the cellars of their Muggle relatives.

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Dear Mister Potter,

The Ministry of Magic detected an indeterminate emission of magical energy within the confines of Number Four Privet Drive, Little Whinging, Surrey, at nine minutes past eleven this evening. This energy emission did not correspond to any known spells or potions, and is therefore outside the scope of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery.

Though uncommon, it is not without precedent for young wizards to experience nocturnal energy emissions or other episodes of unintentional wandless magic. We believe that this incident was most likely a consequence of your natural development, although the amount of energy detected was rather more substantial than normally observed.

It is important that young wizards affected by such circumstances learn to control nocturnal emissions and similar episodes, and to constructively channel their pent-up energy. Accordingly, we have notified the Headmaster, your Head of House, and the Matron of the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry of your suspected condition. They are well prepared to assist you in the selection of effective methods and learning materials, and will guide you in the development and maintenance of appropriate control.

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

Ministry for Magic

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Harry looked up at the Dursleys. Aunt Petunia stood at the foot of the stairs, ashen faced. Dudley watched him with a glare and a scowl. Uncle Vernon, still purple though a shade or two lighter now, closed the distance between them much faster than a man of his size had any right. He whipped his arm toward Harry before either Dudley or Aunt Petunia could react and seized the letter.

“From your ruddy Ministry, is it? You should get the gallows for this!” Uncle Vernon bellowed. He read the letter from the Ministry, shook his head, and read it a second time before his brow beetled. “What are they playing at? Nocturnal emissions...? Natural development... appropriate methods... maintain control... pent-up energy?” He snorted and then began to laugh. His beefy torso rolled in waves. Just as Harry thought he was going to stop, he burst into hysterical cackles.

“Give me that!” Aunt Petunia snapped, snatching the letter from Uncle Vernon. She, too, read the letter twice, and then sniggered, “Goodness... when this happens to Dudley... heh, heh... I just have to... ha, ha, ha... wash the sheets!”

Dudley flushed beet-red and angrily seized the letter from his mother. He read the letter very slowly. After a second reading he thrust it back at Harry and then began to rummage through his mangled equipment.

Harry read the letter again. ‘Unexpected nocturnal emissions’... ‘a consequence of natural development’... ‘constructively channel pent-up energy’... no, they couldn’t think that! His face burned and his insides plummeted. Uncle Vernon tried to speak, waggled his index finger at Harry, and again burst into laughter. Harry wanted to dash up the stairs, burst through the front door, and run south-eastward until he fell into the sea and drowned, but his feet were rooted to the floor.

He jammed the letter back into its envelope but the corner hung up on the inside of the envelope, which left only a single line below Madam Hopkirk’s signature visible: Cc: Prof. A. Dumbledore, Prof. M. McGonagall, and Madam P. Pomfrey, HSWW. A one-way journey to the sea sounded better to Harry with each passing moment.

After a very long time - Harry was sure it was in the vicinity of a week - Uncle Vernon calmed down enough to say, “YOU – clean this up! Stay up all night if it’s required. I expect you to figure out how you’re going to repair my wall, and you’ll start at it tomorrow. I know you people have your ways, and I don’t want to hear a word about it. That wall will be repaired before we’re rid of you. Is – that - understood?”

“Yes, Uncle Vernon,” said Harry.

Uncle Vernon harrumphed, and then muttered, “Shame about the equipment,” at Dudley. Aunt Petunia gave a baleful shake of the head as if Harry was a pet who had wet the carpet. Uncle Vernon muttered, “Nocturnal emissions,” sniggered as he climbed the first flight of stairs and then laughed all the way to his bedroom with Aunt Petunia following close behind.

Dudley crossed his beefy arms, clenched his fists, and stood silent until his parents could no longer be heard. He reached down and picked up a twisted and battered ten-pound dumbbell. “My bags... my gloves... my weights... all – ruined! RUINED!”

Harry said quietly, “I’ll buy you new equipment.”

Dudley eyed him like a predator scouting for a live meal. “With what? You wear my hand-me-downs, you don’t get an allowance... steady on – you don’t get an allowance, right?”

“I’m receiving an inheritance,” said Harry. “You remember my... godfather?” Dudley gave a nervous nod.

“He was killed this spring by one of Lord Voldemort’s followers,” said Harry matter-of-factly, even though there was nothing at all matter-of-fact about what had happened or the churning in his stomach every time that he thought of it. “There should be enough to take care of everything.” And if not, there’s surely enough in my vault to cover it several times over, he knew.

“When?” Dudley asked menacingly. “I won’t miss training over this.”

Harry trudged up the stairs to gather up supplies. “Tomorrow, then,” he croaked, his throat still burning. “Time to start cleaning, I suppose.”

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July 29, 1996

Harry sat bolt upright in his bed, dizzy and disoriented from yet another Sirius dream. He fumbled for his glasses. It was half past six and he'd had a little more than three hours of sleep. He tugged on his jersey and sweatpants, crept down the stairs, and prepared the morning meal. It struck him that Uncle Vernon would as likely laugh at him as shout. When Dudley made his way down, he slipped past and back to his small room.

He quickly leafed through stacks of books and papers. At last, he found the scrap of parchment that he was looking for. He tucked the scrap in his pocket along with a Muggle biro and a handful of Muggle coins from the small cache of money tucked away in the bottom of his trunk.

"I'm taking my run early," he called out to Dudley, and set out the door into a fifth day of mist and drizzle just as his uncle lumbered down the stairs for breakfast. Near the end of his usual hour and a half he stopped at a telephone box across from the market. He fished out the coins and the scrap of parchment and dialled the number written there.

After several rings, a woman answered, "Hello?"

"H-Hermione? Uh, Hermione Granger, please?" Harry stammered.

"May I ask who is calling, please?" The voice took on a suspicious tone.

"This is Harry Potter," he said.

"Ah! This is Mrs. Granger speaking," the woman said. "Hold while I fetch Hermione, would you? No doubt she'll be pleased that you've called."

There was an interminable silence, and then... "Harry? Is that really you?"

“Hello, Hermione,” he said. There was a long silence. “Hermione?” he said again. “Hello? Are you still there? Erm... how has your summer been?”

“Harry Potter!” Hermione erupted. “I hear from you for the first time since King’s Cross - on the telephone, no less – after no letters, no owls, not a sign of you all summer long, and you have the NERVE to ask me that? ‘How has your summer been’? You could have been dead for all we knew, and you call me to ask ‘How has your summer been?’ You are a PRAT, Harry – a great PRAT, that’s what you are!”

“Look, I...” Harry tried to interject.

She blustered on, “I’ll tell you how my summer has been – rotten to the core! Everyone’s a wreck, for goodness’ sake, what with all the attacks –”

Harry cut in, “Attacks? What attacks? I haven’t seen anything on the news that would have...”

“There’s another one in the Prophet every single day. It’s even in the Quibbler, for goodness’ sake!” Hermione fumed.

“I meant the news on the telly, Hermione,” Harry said. “You know I don’t take either of the papers.”

“You’re not watching very closely, then!” snapped Hermione. “You mean to tell me that you don’t know anything? I expected that Professor Dumbledore would have kept...”

Something inside Harry flared. “What, that Dumbledore would have kept me informed? Like he’s kept me informed for the last five years, do you mean? No, Hermione, there’s no risk of that. I don’t know a thing about anything that’s happened this summer – not one thing!”

There was silence again for a moment, before Hermione shouted, “For the first time in this conversation, I completely agree with you! You don’t know a thing!”

Harry took a few calming breaths. "I don't want to fight with you, right? I'll leave it to you and Ron." He hesitated for a few moments and then added, "An owl came yesterday."

Hermione asked quietly, "Was it from Gringotts?"

"How did you...?"

"I received a letter yesterday evening. Harry... are you all right with this?" Hermione asked.

Harry said flatly, "He's dead. They have to do something with his things, I suppose."

"Are you ready to; you know... talk about what happened? I mean, if you are, then you can talk to me," Hermione told him. "You know that, don't you? You can always talk to me."

The telephone receiver shook in Harry's trembling hand. He knew that she meant well, but he also knew that he wasn't ready. For that matter, he doubted that she was prepared for what he might have to say. He wondered what she would think of him if he recounted his last meeting with Dumbledore.

"Do you have a number to ring Dean Thomas?" he asked abruptly.

"Wha...? For Dean? I have tried to collect numbers from the Muggle-borns I know... why would you want to contact him?" Hermione asked.

"I need someone who can draw," Harry said.

"Someone who can draw...? I'll see if I have it, then," she said in an odd pitch. A minute later, she returned to the telephone and he scribbled down the number.

"I need to get to Diagon Alley, as well," Harry said.

"On account of the letter?" she asked.

"That and some other business," he said.

"I'm sure that if you owl Professor Lupin, then the Order can make arrangements for you," she said. "I imagine that Professor Dumbledore might even have Gringotts call on you."

"Oh, I'm sure Uncle Vernon would love that," Harry laughed. "'Uncle Vernon, let me introduce you to my personal goblin banker.' Can you imagine it? I could sell tickets."

Hermione said flatly, "I rather imagined they would send a human employee?"

"I'm joking, obviously," Harry told her. "I was actually hoping that you could help me with directions to the Leaky Cauldron. I mean, I've ridden there, but I didn't pay any attention. Will I come close on the Underground from King's Cross?"

The line went silent for a few moments, and then Hermione thundered, "Are you completely MAD? If you really must go there, then you owl Professor Dumbledore right - now and he'll arrange an escort! You've no idea who might be listening to this call!"

Harry snarled, "I can take care of myself! I imagine the Order has better things to do than baby-sit me if things are as awful as you say. Just give me the directions, would you?"

"Fine! I don't need to get them from my parents. This is a horrible idea, Harry!" Hermione barked place names and turns at him. Harry barely managed to put biro to parchment in time. When she finished, she added sarcastically, "Anything else I can do for you, milord?"

Harry snapped, "That's quite enough, thank you. I don't want to be a bother!"

There was another long pause on the other end of the line, and then Hermione said with a trembling voice, "You're not a bother, Harry. I just... I just... well, I just worry about you constantly. Can you blame me? It's not as though you don't attract trouble. I mean, if anything... anything at all..." She trailed off.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said; “Please don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying,” she sniffed.

Harry said, “I’m sorry all the same. It – it’s good to hear your voice, Hermione.” He felt a wave of sadness from somewhere; he needed to comfort her and to show that he was sorry. The telephone box was positively stifling. Even the receiver was hot to the touch. He opened the door a crack and a warm draft blew in. There was an odd popping and grinding sound on the other end of the line, followed by a strange sound from Hermione and a resonating whump! The line went dead.

Harry raced for Privet Drive. Hedwig had been gone for days. He hadn’t been able to reach Mrs. Figg for two days, and he didn’t know who else might be watching him or how to contact them without using an owl. He couldn’t yet Apparate and of course the Dursley house wasn’t connected to the Floo Network. Hermione was in trouble, and his chest was pounding, and... and he forced himself to think. That’s what she would do if she were in my shoes, Harry thought. She would stop and think on what happened.

If the phone had died because of a Death Eater attack, then the Dark Mark would alert the Order long before he could reach her home. If she was being watched, then she was probably safe. He decided that his best option to connect with the wizarding world was to get to Diagon Alley as quickly as he could.

Ten minutes later, Harry ran into the house. “Dudley!” he shouted

Dudley grumbled, “I’m busy, Potter,” from the sofa. He was still sulking over his weights and punching bags, but the old Dudley would have assembled his friends for a round of Harry Hunting – or worse.

Harry grabbed him by the arm and pulled without effect. “Have you ever taken the train?”

Dudley still didn’t look up. “The train?”

“You do want me to replace your things?” Harry snapped.

Dudley perked up. "My things...? Oh! So you want to fetch your money?" He sat up, but Harry was sure he was moving slowly on purpose. Harry tugged at his arm, and he snorted, "Where's the hurry, what?"

"I thought you wanted new equipment straight away," Harry said quickly.

"Doesn't mean you had to cut into my programme. If I hadn't thought you were good for it, I would have taken payment from your hide," said Dudley. He strolled to the kitchen and rummaged until he found a train timetable. "All right, where do you need to go?"

"King's Cross, or near to there, actually," Harry told him.

Dudley's eyebrows lifted. "London? You need to go to London?"

Harry cleared his throat and explained, "You can't exactly use the normal places when you're on the run from the law. I mean, he was wanted for a dozen murders, after all. He made some private arrangements, then, with some of his associates in London, and..."

"I'm not spending half the day on a train, not today at least," Dudley said firmly.

"Forget it, then," Harry huffed. "We have our own ways. I'll just get my wand and –"

Dudley crossed his arms and blocked Harry's way. "You're not going anywhere unless I come with you, and I'm not going to London today."

"You don't need to come along," Harry snapped. "You already said I'm good for it." He headed toward the door.

Dudley planted his hand on Harry's chest. "That's nothing to do with it. Mum told me you can't leave unless she says so, or unless one of us is with you – Mum or me, I mean; even Dad can't allow it without Mum's say-so. It's to do with whatever keeps us safe. She isn't here

and I've got other things planned. We'll do it tomorrow or the day after."

Harry skirted around Dudley and made it as far as the front room before Dudley again blocked him. "A friend of mine may be in danger," Harry insisted. "If you don't want to help me, just say it. I shouldn't expect help from you, anyway."

Dudley's eyes narrowed. "Are you taking the mickey out of me?"

"I wouldn't joke about something like this," Harry said.

"What sort of friend, then?" Dudley asked.

Harry demanded, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, come off it. I said, 'what sort of friend'? It isn't one of those red-headed sods with the awful candy, is it?" Dudley grumbled.

Harry tried to summon a neutral expression but couldn't keep himself from fidgeting. "No, it's not one of the Weasleys. Look, I'll ask one more time. Are you going to help me, or not? After this, I won't be asking again!"

Dudley gave Harry a knowing look. "Ahh, I see. It's that sort of friend. There's only one reason for the red face and all this wiggling about, I figure: Potter's got himself a girlfriend!"

Harry steamed, "I do not have a girlfriend. Hermione and I have known each other since our first day at Hogwarts, and I think she's in danger. I don't have time to waste on – what are you laughing at?"

Dudley hooted, "Hermione? That sounds like somebody's grandmother. Oh, your girlfriend must be a prize!"

Dudley proceeded apace with insults, and Harry seethed. He could feel Dudley's hot breath blowing on his face, and he could almost hear his self-control cracking and popping into useless bits. He seized the front of Dudley's shirt and shouted, "Shut it! Why, you're

not worth a tenth of her! You're not good enough to clean up after her!"

He shouted so hard that the room was swimming and his own ears were ringing, before he realised that Dudley was laughing at him. "Oh, definitely a girlfriend!" Dudley howled. "This is brilliant! I wish I hadn't broken my camera, because this would be smashing – "

CRASH!

Dudley pulled away from Harry's grasp and spun around. Harry didn't have to move at all to see that Aunt Petunia's prized vase was no longer on the mantle.

Both of them gaped at the pile of porcelain bits on the carpet. Dudley shrieked, "Oh, God! Mum loves that vase! It's the one Dad brought her from China, or – er - Canada, or someplace..." He settled himself, glared at Harry, and added, "Point is, she's going to kill you!"

The room instantly stopped swimming before Harry's eyes. "Kill me? I didn't do anything! It must have been tipsy or something!"

Dudley shook his head. "How thick are you? It's broken. You're – well – you know... you. As dodgy as this summer's been, that's still how Mum will see it."

Harry fished around a bit, and produced his wand.

Dudley backed up quickly. "I'm just telling it like it is. Don't point that thing at me!"

Harry sighed. "I'm not pointing anything at you. Do you think all the pieces are there?"

"Looks like they are," Dudley said tentatively. "Why?"

Harry replied, "I don't want to leave it chipped; Aunt Petunia would take notice."

Dudley's eyes grew wider. "Steady on! You're not fixing it, are you?"

“That’s my plan – lumos!” said Harry, frustrated with Dudley’s inability to grasp the obvious. Dudley flinched when the spell was cast. Harry ran the lighted tip of his wand along the edges of the carpet and along the fireplace masonry, hoping to spot any shiny bits.

“You should put that thing away before one of those birds comes... er... what if those dementey things come looking for you?” Dudley whimpered.

“First of all, I don’t think the witch who sent them in the first place is in any condition to do it again – aha, there’s one. Second – good, there’s another – the Dementors aren’t working for the Ministry anymore – glad that I took a glance beneath the stones – and third –” Harry blustered as he deposited the bits of vase into the rest of the pile, “– let the Ministry come. I honestly don’t care anymore.”

Harry pointed his wand at the pile of porcelain and said, “Reparo!” Two more stray bits jumped off the carpet to join the rest of the vase as it reassembled itself. “I guess there was no need to look closely,” he said sheepishly.

Dudley goggled at him with a mix of awe, fear and jealousy. Harry fetched a cloth and quickly dusted the entire mantle, rather than take the chance Aunt Petunia would notice that the vase had moved. He sat down and waited for Dudley to say something, or for an owl with an official envelope to arrive. Dudley went from whimpering to scowling to silence and there was no sign of an owl.

Dudley crossed his arms stiffly. “Okay, Potter... you fix my camera and I’ll come with you to London. You’d best decide now, and there’ll be no lingering.”

Harry only thought about it for a moment. “If one repair spell didn’t earn a letter, what harm can there be in another?”

“Fix the camera and then we’re off... but wash first – you smell,” Dudley said.

* * * * *

“We should have stayed on the Underground another two stops or more,” Dudley whined; “we’ve walked a half an hour at least. I don’t think you’ve any idea of where you’re going.”

Harry ignored him and squinted for a moment. “Finally! It’s right there,” said Harry, waving his hand toward a record store and a bookshop.

Dudley looked, and then squinted, then put his hands to his hips and leaned forward intently. He said impatiently, “So... does your sort keep their money in record stores, or do you stuff it behind books?”

Harry said matter-of-factly, “You can’t see it... or you’re not seeing it, at any rate. It’s between the two stores.”

Dudley’s eyes crossed for a moment. “Between the...?” He recovered himself and snorted, “Sounds like codswallop to me. ’Course, so does putting back together broken vases and blowing up the cellar and those dementles. So, then – how do I get inside a place that I can’t see?”

Harry thought about that as they crossed at the intersection. He stopped in front of the record store and said, “All right, put your hand on my shoulder and I’ll lead you in like a blind person. Close your eyes – I think that will be easier.”

Dudley said, “That’s odd... I know I smell food... and beer, I think?”

Harry said, “Open your eyes.”

If anything, the Leaky Cauldron looked a little more downtrodden than Harry remembered. The biggest difference between this visit and his last, however, was that he was now staring at two dozen wizards and witches with menacing expressions and pointed wands.

“Tom,” a warlock Harry didn’t recognize shouted, “you need to see about your disillusionment charms!”

A bald old man hobbled from behind the bar. "What's the kerfuffle... more Muggles? How're they finding the door? Right then, who has a cracking memory charm?"

Harry was thankful Dudley was silent. He chose not to speak, and instead drew his wand. This one should be all right, at least – definitely self-defence, he thought. "Expelliarmus! Accio wands!" he shouted. A pile of wands formed at his feet.

He smiled at Tom the innkeeper, and said, "Shall we start again?" Looking around at the group of shocked faces, he added, "Sorry about all this."

Tom looked at him apprehensively. "You do have a familiar look about you... Merlin's ghost, you remind me of Sirius Black..."

Harry afforded himself a slight smile. True, his hair was somewhat longer and a small growth spurt had left him lankier... Sirius would enjoy this, he decided.

"I guess I've changed a bit since you've last seen me," Harry said. He shifted to one side so no one else would see, and then drew back his fringe.

Tom raised his hand to his mouth. "Bless my soul; it has been a long time!" He stepped forward with surprising speed and pulled Harry into a vigorous handshake.

The innkeeper looked around the room and then announced loudly, "Right, then – show's over. Don't leave your wands lying about." He turned to Harry and added, "I'll arrange food and drink for you and your companion. Follow me."

The three of them entered a private parlour. Tom flung the door closed, quickly cast an Imperturbable Charm, and then demanded, "What in the name of Godric Gryffindor and all that's holy are you doing here alone, Mr. Potter – and dragging with you such an obvious Muggle?"

Harry said, "This is my cousin, Dudley Dursley" – Dudley offered a limp handshake and a squeak – "and I need to get to the Alley as fast as possible."

Tom pursed his lips in thought for a moment. "You shouldn't take the Mu... er, your cousin. Trust me on this." He turned his attention to Dudley, addressing him like a small child, "Mr. Dursley, you may stay in this room until Harry comes to collect you. I'll bring you something to drink and eat. Can I trust that you will stay out of trouble?"

Dudley was sufficiently cowed that he responded in kind, "Yes, sir. I'll be good."

"Hurry along, then, and do your business," said Tom.

"A moment with my cousin and then I'll be off," Harry said firmly. Tom frowned but stepped out.

Harry set down his knapsack and drew out his Invisibility Cloak. He didn't want to leave it with Dudley, but it seemed the right thing to do. He waved his hand in front of Dudley's face. "Dudley?"

Dudley flinched. "This is all very dodgy," he said quietly.

Harry shook him by the shoulders. "Dudley! I need to leave you with something; this is very important. It belonged to... Dudley!"

Dudley looked at Harry with unfocused eyes. He came back like a boxer shaking off an unexpected blow. "Sorry, it's just – I mean – this is how you live?"

"Not really, no. The Leaky Cauldron is just a gateway of sorts to where I'm going. Now, I need to show you something." Harry spread the Invisibility Cloak across the table before Dudley, which promptly vanished.

Dudley flinched, but then broke into a smile. Then he smiled a bit. "Blimey, the fun a bloke could have with this!"

Harry couldn't help but grin, even though Dudley's idea of fun was probably quite different than his own. "This was my father's" – he hesitated, and quickly decided what to tell Dudley and what to keep to himself – "and you might need it while I'm gone. If anything happens that's too much – and I don't mean wands or owls or the like – you throw this over yourself, head straight out to the front door and don't look back. Understand?" Harry knew Dudley didn't like being ordered around, but he seemed nervous enough to comply.

Dudley nodded and responded, "If something mad happens, go straight through the pub and outside."

Harry instinctively patted Dudley on the shoulder and then made his way out of the parlour. Tom was waiting for him just outside, with a nondescript black cloak in his hands. "Take this," he insisted; "Best that you don't pass through the gate without one."

Harry nodded and put on the cloak. He walked briskly through the bar and into the tiny courtyard, eager to tap the bricks and enter Diagon Alley. What he saw in the alley stopped him cold. Where there had been a trash bin and tufts of weeds, there was now a gatehouse with a barrier. Harry thought it looked like a border crossing from one of Uncle Vernon's history programmes on the telly. One security wizard was sitting in the gatehouse, and a second stood before the barrier. Both wore peacock-blue robes emblazoned with the letters D F D L and an eagle clutching a snake in its talons.

The wizard standing before the barrier immediately drew his wand, and Harry responded in kind. The wizard asked, "Would you please step over here?" and pointed toward the gatehouse. Harry was checked front and back with the same kind of golden rod used at the Ministry for Magic.

"Wand, please?" asked the wizard sitting in the gatehouse. Harry produced his wand. His wand lowered from view for a moment, and then the security wizard quickly moved to hand it back. He extended a hand in greeting. "Mr. Potter, what a surprise! Sorry about all this – the times we live in, and all that?"

The blue-robed wizard appraised Harry. "So you're Harry Potter? I expected you'd be bigger."

The wizard in the gatehouse cut off his colleague curtly. "Thank you, Mr. Potter. Enjoy your time in Diagon Alley." The barrier floated upward, and the brick wall reorganized itself to reveal the cobblestone street beyond.

Chapter Two

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

It was drizzling in Diagon Alley just like the rest of London, but the weather didn't fully account for the gloom. Harry instinctively raised the hood of his borrowed cloak. The alley was far quieter than he recalled it – a cluster of wizards here, a gaggle of ancient witches there, a knot of children and parents looking in the windows of Quality Quidditch Supplies, pairs and groups of witches and wizards coming in and out of Gringotts. He searched for Fred and George Weasley's storefront – surely they would know what had happened at the Grangers' home. Harry heard a sound behind him and spun, wand drawn and a curse on his lips.

“What in Merlin's name are you doing here alone?” Bill Weasley whispered forcefully. He had the same long hair and fang earring that Harry remembered but was robed in a very traditional style.

It suddenly struck Harry – he's part of the Order. He grabbed Bill by the sides of the arms. “Hermione! Oh my God! I –”

Bill gently pushed him away and said quietly, “She's been with her parents all summer, closely watched. I take it you know that she had a bit of a fright this morning?”

Harry staggered forward, and counted out ragged breaths. He stammered, “It's – just – telephone – we were – arguing – and – pop – and – the line died and – I didn't know – and –”

“Calm yourself – quickly,” Bill said. “The whole thing was passing strange, but she's fine. Ron was on edge about it as well. You three certainly are tight, aren't you?” He let Harry settle himself for a few moments, and then pressed, “So... why are you here?”

“Mrs. Figg's away, and I didn't know how else to find out whether Hermione was safe,” Harry admitted.

“You surely could have stepped outside and whistled for someone,” Bill frowned.

Harry shrugged. “I also need to see about Sirius Black’s will.”

Bill’s face froze. “I see... well, it’s best we get you off the Alley at any rate. I’ll come with you.” Harry continued toward Gringotts with Bill close at his side. He didn’t like being handled but he let Bill walk him past the uniformed goblin, through the bronze doors, and into Gringotts.

Bill steered him to one side of the lobby, looked around, and began quietly, “Look, I know that he was your godfather and that he was important to you. I’m really very sorry about, well... everything... but please tell me you’re not going to get crossed up in Black family affairs.”

“He’s left me something,” Harry shrugged. He handed the Gringotts letter to Bill, who gave it a quick reading.

“You’re the principal beneficiary? You shouldn’t go in there without a representative of some sort, Harry,” said Bill. “I’m surprised that they sent this letter to you at all, as opposed to your legal guardian.”

Harry laughed. “Uncle Vernon could have received a hundred owls and every post would have been burned.”

“I meant your wizarding guardian,” Bill said; “Surely you have one? There are a number of issues where your aunt and uncle couldn’t hope to manage. When you were called before the Wizengamot last year for that Dementor business, who stood for you?”

“Dumbledore came at the last minute,” said Harry.

Bill pondered that for a moment. “He must be your wizarding guardian, then. I suppose that most of the decisions where the Dursleys couldn’t weigh in have probably related to Hogwarts... you really should speak with him before you go in there.”

Harry's mouth tightened into a thin line and he snatched back the letter. "Thank you for the advice." Bill's eyebrows rose a bit but he didn't say anything. .

"Harry, are you certain about this?" Bill asked, sounding more than a little nervous. "If I were to owl Dumbledore, I imagine he'd arrive within the hour."

Harry set his jaw. "I don't have a lot of time. I need to finish this," he said firmly.

"I was six years behind Sirius at Hogwarts, but I knew him by reputation – every Gryffindor did," Bill said forcefully. "It was... well, it would have been difficult not to. He was terribly popular, and a notorious prankster of course. But this is the important part: everything he did seemed inches from dangerous. He really ruffled my dad in the old days, and you know that would take quite a lot. Now, add in a dozen years with Dementors having at you –" Bill put his hand on Harry's shoulder to keep him from jumping in, before continuing, "– and who knows what you'll get as a result? Everyone can tell you that Sirius was impossible this spring. You should also remember the history behind his family. This isn't going to be as easy as signing for his trunk."

Harry's eyes narrowed and he said through clenched teeth, "Thank you for walking me here. I'm going to take care of my business now."

Bill took his hand off Harry, frowning. "A pleasure, Harry," he said stiffly. "You know that I have to take care of mine as well – I'm sorry for that." Harry edged around him and headed directly for the tellers. A free goblin at the long counter motioned to Harry.

" Good afternoon," said Harry, "I'm here to visit the Trust Department."

The goblin's eyes narrowed. "Do you have an appointment?"

Harry held out the letter. "It's to do with an inheritance." He suddenly felt very conspicuous.

The goblin examined the letter closely. "This is in order. I will have someone from the Trust Department collect you shortly. Do you have other business to conduct?"

"Not yet," Harry said.

The goblin wagged its long fingers toward a line of benches near some of the many doors leading off the main hall. Harry left the counter to find a seat. He spotted a familiar elderly woman and a stout young man in a queue before the next counter.

Harry blinked twice, to be sure he was right, before he said, "Oi, Neville!" He noticed how quiet and anxious the Gringotts great hall became and winced.

The young man drew his wand and instinctively moved in front of the old woman and called out boldly, "Who's asking?"

Harry smiled; Neville lowered his wand slightly, and Harry said, "Don't lower your wand so easily. I should think we covered that in the D.A.?"

Neville cocked his head and then broke out in a big grin. "I don't believe it! Er... that is, what are you doing here? I scarcely recognized you." He gave Harry a firm handshake.

Harry found Neville's grin infectious. He said, "Likewise, Neville. Confidence looks good on you," and drew Neville into an awkward embrace, adding, "don't you agree, Mrs. Longbottom?"

Neville's grandmother sized up Harry with her eyes. She still seemed very formidable, although standing there in her rain-matted fox fur she looked much older than the previous Christmas. "You look familiar to me." She peered intently through Harry's wet bangs. "Ah, of course. I want to thank you for saving Neville's life. I would like to see you thrashed for risking it as well, but that is not my place."

Neville frowned. "Harry doesn't deserve that. I decided to help him, he didn't ask."

Mrs. Longbottom shot Neville a stern look. "Yes, and I would expect better judgment on your part – ah, if you would just show your parents' good sense now and again?" Neville glowered at her.

Harry was taken aback; Neville didn't break eye contact with his grandmother, or stammer, or even flush. He rewarded Neville's new resolve. "I think that Neville may have left out some of the details from the Ministry. You should know, ma'am, that Neville saved me from a Death Eater –"

Mrs. Longbottom clutched a shrivelled hand to her chest and insisted in an exaggerated whisper, "Keep your voice down, boy! Neville, is this true?" Neville at last looked at the floor, but he nodded. She composed herself and said quietly, "I had no idea that Neville could be so reckless. You've been good to him in the past, I understand? I hope that you will help him learn to protect himself."

"Mrs. Longbottom, Neville is loyal, honest and brave. He's brilliant in Herbology – knows almost as much as Professor Sprout, I reckon – and his defensive skills are really quite good. I would trust him with my life." Harry deliberately looked into her eyes. "I think his parents would have been proud of him that night, ma'am."

Neville gaped at Harry, and watched his grandmother for a reaction. "I suspect that you give him too much credit at your own expense, but I suppose I must take you at your word," she said at last. "What are you doing here by yourself? It's simply not safe these days."

Neville chimed in, "And where've you been all summer? I mean, I've wanted to owl you but... er..."

Mrs. Longbottom cleared her throat. "Neville! Stop pestering for a moment." She turned her attention back to Harry. "Young man, why are you here?"

Harry said, "I'm waiting on the Trust Department."

“I see. Neville, wait with your friend; I’ve no time to fret about losing you in the vaults. The Daughters are meeting about the cotillion at three o’clock.” Mrs. Longbottom sighed and added to Harry, “See that he doesn’t wander, would you? I shan’t be long.” With that, she turned her attention back to the queue as though Neville had disappeared. Harry and Neville found a free bench in the area where the goblin at the counter had pointed.

“Trust Department, eh?” Neville said.

“Uh-huh,” Harry replied, not wanting to discuss it. “So, who are the Daughters?”

Neville looked distracted. “Huh? What, the Daughters of the Goblin Wars?”

“Let me guess, it’s in Hogwarts: a History,” Harry scowled.

Neville shrugged, “I suppose it’s in there somewhere. You’ve never heard of the Daughters? It’s no big deal; it’s just a lineage society.”

“I’ve lived with Muggles for most of my life,” said Harry.

“Oh, right then,” explained Neville. “Well, to join the Daughters of the Goblin Wars, you have to be a witch who can trace her lineage directly to someone on the registered list of combatants from the Goblin Wars. That’s why it’s called a lineage society. They have parties and dances, raise money for charities... that sort of thing. That big, ugly pin on Gran’s robe – that’s her Daughters pin. I can’t believe she wore it here. The goblins still have hard feelings, you know?”

Harry asked, “Why take the chance of making the goblins angry, then?”

Neville flushed, looking anywhere but at Harry. “Well, er, mind you, I don’t think that it’s right... I mean, it’s a bit cowardly, although I’d never say that to Gran –”

“Neville, out with it,” Harry pressed.

“It takes four centuries of wizarding lineage to belong. You could as well paint ‘I’m a pureblood’ on her cloak,” Neville told him.

“Why would she care about that?” Harry wondered aloud.

Neville’s eyes widened. “You don’t know what’s been happening?”

Harry left out what he’d learned from Hermione. “I’ve been at the Dursleys all summer, and they don’t tolerate owls and wizarding and all that, so I’ve been a bit isolated,” he said. “I’ve been watching the BBC... you know, the Muggle news, looking for signs.”

Neville asked, “Then why’d you tell Professor Dumbledore that you wanted to be left alone, no letters, no visitors?” in an accusing tone.

Harry thought, Dumbledore’s thorough – I’ll give him that. He began, “Now, look here, I –”

“I hope you had a grand time,” spluttered Neville nervously, “a smashing good summer. From the look of it, you were off pretending to be someone else –”

“It’s – just – hair,” Harry said dangerously.

Neville gulped, “I’m sorry, Harry. Anyway, V- V- Volde – well, you know who I mean, he –”

“Say the name, Neville,” Harry seethed.

“He and his supporters have been killing all summer,” Neville went on. “You wouldn’t have seen anything from the Muggles; the Ministry’s been working overtime to keep it quiet.”

“Who’s being killed? Is it random? Are there targets...?” Harry demanded.

“So far it’s been Muggle-born wizards and witches, their Muggle families, and, and... and squibs,” Neville sniffed. “If you hadn’t started the D.A., and if I hadn’t come to the Ministry with you... people were still wondering about me.”

“So Hermione’s being looked after, then,” Harry realised.

A little blond girl tugged on Harry’s pant leg. “You wear funny clothes,” she announced in a high-pitched voice. Harry looked down and saw that his cloak was wide open, revealing his Muggle outfit.

“Elise!” a woman at the next bench shouted.

“It’s all right,” Harry said, keeping his attention on the little girl. “I live with Muggles, and this is how they dress.”

She looked at him intently. “You have a funny scar there,” she said matter-of-factly and pointed, “on your head.”

Harry nodded. “I know I do,” he said, “I’ve had it since —”

The girl kept talking as though Harry hadn’t spoken. “My mum told me about a boy named Harry Potter with a scar on his head,” she said, “and he got it from a very bad man. What’s your name, mister?”

“My name’s Harry, and your name’s Elise,” Harry said.

The little girl’s eyes widened. “How’d you know that?” she asked. “Is that a trick?”

The girl’s mother had moved to stand behind her, without Harry noticing. She had a strange look on her face, nervous but faintly reverent. “I apologize for my daughter, Mr. Potter,” the woman said. “Come along, Elise; don’t be a bother.” Harry noticed two older people – probably the girl’s grandparents – watching the scene nervously.

Harry insisted, “She’s no bother, honestly.”

The woman asked, "Are you sure? I should think it would get old, always being pestered."

Harry laughed. "I don't get out much," he said. "Muggles and school mates aren't impressed by me, I guess." He winked at Neville.

The girl looked at her mother with disbelief. "Mum, this can't be Harry Potter. He's old." Her mother winced.

"I'm Harry Potter, all right; I grew up, you see?" Harry said gently.

The girl pointed at his scar. "Does it hurt?" she asked.

"Not very often," Harry answered.

The girl's mother said, "We never believed the Daily Prophet, you know – all the rubbish that they wrote about you. Can – would you...? We have a camera, and...?"

Harry hesitated for a moment, and then nodded. He said to the girl, "Why don't you sit between my friend and me? Elise, this is Neville. He's one of my friends that help me, uh, fight the bad people." She shyly greeted Neville.

Neville squirmed in his seat. "Harry, are you certain...?"

Harry grinned. "Absolutely, unless you're worried about being seen with me?"

Neville spluttered, "Certainly not!"

The woman took two pictures, and then the grandparents took one of Harry with the little girl, and another of Harry with the girl and her mother. Harry squinted from the flash and realised that they were drawing a crowd. He quickly found himself standing in a crush of people and shaking hands. Neville moved in behind him and warily watched everyone who drew close.

He shook a hand here, signed something there, and found himself receiving an unexpected kiss on the cheek from a girl who looked vaguely familiar. He was pulled one way and then the other for impromptu photographs. After what seemed like an eternity, he was saved by two security goblins that waded into the crowd. He waved to Neville and mouthed "Thank you" in appreciation for how Neville had quite literally watched his back.

The goblins led Harry to one of the endless doors branching off the great hall. Beyond the door was a small room, surely an antechamber for another office. A middle-aged witch stood behind a desk crowded with papers and files. A broad and forbidding witch sat on an adjacent chair, talking animatedly to a familiar-looking wizard with a violet top hat.

The standing witch sighed, "Mr. Potter, we've been expecting you for several minutes."

The seated witch rose smoothly and regally, gazing firmly at Harry through a monocle. She extended a hand. "My name is ..."

Harry took her hand firmly. "I remember you, Madam Bones. Please call me Harry. Oh, and be sure to say hello to Susan for me."

Madam Bones looked at him, puzzled, and then said, "No, I'm not on my way out. I'm on my way in. In this instance, I have been named the Ministry's – "

Dedalus Diggle cut in excitedly, pumping Harry's hand. "Delighted to see you again, Mr. Potter – you can't imagine!"

"Yes, of course," said Harry. He avoided acknowledging Diggle further, to avoid anything that might bring up the Order of the Phoenix. The standing witch motioned to a door that had abruptly appeared; it slowly creaked open.

The room beyond was more dungeon than office. The walls were rough-hewn. Stalactites descended here and there. Magical torches in wall sconces filled the space with flickering light. Instead of a desk, there was a stone slab balanced on rocks. Three crowded bookcases

were squeezed along one of the irregular walls. Three chairs were set before the stone slab, and a fourth to one side. There was a large rock behind the slab. On another wall were three curio cases that contained things Harry preferred not to see clearly. He sensed something behind him and turned to see a purple head with two horns that loomed over the door.

“That has to be a graphorn,” Harry observed.

“Hogwarts still teaches of magical creatures, it seems, though the teaching is most likely inaccurate,” hissed a corpulent goblin from behind the stone slab, with an ear-to-ear grin that easily contested with Mad-Eye Moody’s smile. “You are correct in this case.” The goblin closed his eyes and took in a deep longing breath. “I enjoy the hunt,” he growled.

Madam Bones and Dedalus Diggle took seats, apparently seeing no need to wait for the goblin to direct them. The goblin kept his full attention on Harry. “Welcome to my office, Mister Potter. I am Fliptrask; the Trust Department of Gringotts is mine. I would not ordinarily be bothered with such a matter as this, but the circumstances are unique and you are the sole remaining beneficiary of one of our larger trusts.” The goblin sat abruptly on the rock behind the stone slab. “To business,” he said.

The bored witch entered from the antechamber as Harry took his seat. She took out a quill and parchment and sat in the fourth seat. Fliptrask reached down and lifted a wooden box onto the slab.

“Trust meeting, July the 29th,” said Fliptrask in an imperious voice as the bored witch took notes, “concerning the execution of the Last Will and Testament of Mister Sirius Orion Black, as it relates to Mister Harry James Potter – fill in the details, Wolfingham. In attendance, in addition to myself and Mister Potter, are Madam Amelia Bones, representing the Ministry for Magic in this matter; Mr. Dedalus Diggle, Esquire, who has been retained by Gringotts for transactions relating to the Black and Potter Trusts pending the outcome of this meeting; and my personal scribe, Frida Wolfingham.”

Fliptrask continued, "The Last Will and Testament of Sirius Orion Black was ruled as valid and enforceable by the Prerogative Court as valid and enforceable on July the 16th, officially unsealed by the Wizengamot on July the 18th, and accepted by the Ministry for Magic of the ruling on the day following. The Prerogative Court ruled on a vote of... Mr. Diggle, the vote?"

Diggle awkwardly thumbed through a lap full of papers before muttering A-ha, and said, "6 to 3."

Madam Bones added, "With a rather stern minority opinion."

Fliptrask smiled his awful smile. "Duly noted. In any case, the execution of this will sets into motion some... what sort of changes?" The goblin hesitated.

"Confusing?" offered Diggle.

"Perilous," sighed Madam Bones.

"Complicated," muttered the scribe.

Fliptrask nodded. "Yes, complicated... some complicated changes in Mr. Potter's custodial status." He turned his attention back on Harry. "Previous to July the 19th, under the common laws of the United Kingdom, you were in the custody of, er... Dursley, is it?"

Diggle fumbled through more papers. "Vernon and Petunia Dursley."

Fliptrask nodded. "Yes, yes... Dursley. Simultaneously, under the decrees of the Ministry for Magic of the United Kingdom, you were a ward under the protection of Mr. Albus Dumbledore." Harry scowled at that but no one took any notice. The goblin continued briskly, "It was decided that Mr. Potter's blood relatives would be allowed to maintain primary custody. Is that an accurate description?"

Diggle nodded. "It is within the facts, yes."

Fliptrask went on with his explanation. "The reason for this arrangement was that Mr. Black's incarceration in Azkaban nullified the original arrangements stipulated in the Last Will and Testaments of James Potter and Lily Evans Potter. The original arrangement provided that Mr. Black would maintain sole legal custody of the younger Mr. Potter in all jurisdictions. However, the restoration of legal rights granted to Mr. Black eliminated this nullification, thereby restoring custodial rights to Mr. Black, now deceased."

Harry blinked hard and then squinted.

Fliptrask asked, "Are you attempting to gain my attention, Mister Potter?"

Harry said, "Sorry, sir. I thought I heard you say that Sirius has custody of me. But he's —" He couldn't bring himself to say 'dead' without emptiness washing over him. "What I mean to ask is, who has custody of me now?"

Madam Bones frowned and said, "Therein lies the problem."

Dedalus Diggle jumped in, "What Madam Bones means to say, Mr. Potter, is that Mr. Black opted for a highly unusual arrangement."

"Highly unusual?" snapped Madam Bones. "It has been decades since this was invoked!"

Diggle frowned. "The underlying principle is generally accepted under American law, and is also surprisingly common in countries where the legal system is based on Roman civil —"

"Mister Diggle!" All eyes turned to the displeased goblin, who continued, "Must I impress upon you the value of my time and the cost of yours? To business!"

Diggle sighed. "Now then, Harry... I have here a series of documents, signed by Mr. Black as an addendum to his will. In essence, he has chosen to adopt you and then to free you. Writs of parens patriae are actually legal under wizarding code, though — as Madam Bones

pointed out – they are rather rare. Technically this does not apply under the Muggle common law in England. The Scots approach matters somewhat differently, so Mr. Black’s Muggle properies were re-established in Scotland. The relevant portions of his Will are being executed through the Scottish courts.”

Fliptrask tapped his long fingers on the stone slab. “Mr. Potter’s eyes are crossing; explain in practical terms.”

“May I?” asked Madam Bones. Fliptrask nodded.

Madam Bones said, “Harry, Sirius Black did something very rash in his Will, something to which you do not have to agree. He has emancipated you. If you sign these documents, you will become a legal adult in the wizarding world and will be subject to all the responsibilities that come with adulthood. You will also become a legal adult in Muggle Scotland in certain respects but not in others. Technically, you will not be a legal adult in Muggle England for another two years in some respects, and another five years in others. The Will appoints a conservator for your Muggle-related affairs in England, but most of the Muggle assets are in Scotland... oh, this has so many implications, I don’t even know where to begin. My research unit struggled even to identify the last time that this was done.”

Diggie scowled. “It’s not so rare as all that,” he cut in. “Emancipation occurs every time minors are allowed to marry, for one. Have you not read the reports regarding Mr. Potter’s treatment by his Muggle relations? Outrageous! It is simply unthinkable that anyone should treat the Boy-Who-Lived as a slave or a common criminal, let alone Muggles!”

Fliptrask cleared his throat; the sound reminded Harry of a stuck garbage disposer. “Mister Potter, I shall cut to the quick. If you sign this addendum to Mr. Black’s Last Will and Testament, then his wishes regarding your custody will be binding. The remainder of the arrangements relate to the disposition of property and are relatively straightforward. I shall leave that to you and Mr. Diggie or whomever else you choose. If you do not sign the addendum, then no changes shall occur in your custody. The personal and real property assigned

to you in the will would be held in trust until you reach the normal age of majority.” The goblin glanced at a mantle clock atop one of the curios. “I have four minutes remaining for this matter. If you have questions, ask them now.”

Harry’s mind raced. “What would a conservator do? You said I would have a conservator for my affairs in England?”

Diggle said, “Under the Muggle common law, you can enter into several types of contracts as a minor. However, there are some actions that require the approval of a conservator, mostly to do with real property and marriage.”

“You said one was named for me in the will. Who is it?” asked Harry.

Madam Bones looked as if she had happened upon an unpleasant Bertie Bott’s flavour. “The will names Remus Lupin as your conservator, Harry. I am aware of the man’s relationship to your family, and thus I persuaded my colleagues to allow this despite his status. He seems to have a thorough understanding of the Muggle world, which is necessary in this instance. However, the Ministry requires that you appoint a second witch or wizard to provide additional oversight. Until you make an appointment, I have been given that responsibility.”

Harry pursed his lips for a few moments before he said. “I’d like you to do it going forward, then.”

Madam Bones arched a single eyebrow. “Why would you entrust me with this?” she asked.

“Firstly, if I can’t trust you, then whom can I trust?” he said, which provoked a faint smile from the witches and wizards in the chamber. “Secondly, Susan says good things about you and I expect she’s a good judge of character. Thirdly, you were fair during my hearing last year. Besides all of that, I figure that if you work with Remus for a while, you won’t wrinkle your nose that way when I say his name.”

Madam Bones silently regarded him for a time, then removed her monocle and slowly cleaned it with the edge of her cloak. "Perhaps," she said. "I accept."

"Noted," Fliptrask said as he gestured to the scribe.

"Of course that comes to naught if you wait to sign the will until you reach your majority," Madam Bones added. Harry gritted his teeth at that.

Fliptrask cleared his throat. "Additional questions? No? Mister Potter, you have until the sixteenth of August to sign this addendum if you so choose. You should also know that some elements of the Will do not take effect until the thirty-first of July. If you sign now, you may do so before Wolfigham and Mr. Diggle. If you sign later, make arrangements accordingly. In any event, my time for this matter is about to expire —"

"I'd like a quill," Harry said.

Madam Bones said to him, "Please take some time to think on this. Arrangements can be made for you to sign at another time."

Harry closed his eyes in thought. "Is this why I didn't get a letter today? I used a repair spell, you know."

"I'm aware of that; you did so twice. You also cast Lumos as well as two spells at the Leaky Cauldron. I have been personally attending to your affairs at the Ministry since Black's will was upheld. Getting out of a trifle is no reason to sign this, Harry; I hope that's not what you're thinking," Madam Bones said with a scowl.

Harry felt like he couldn't draw in enough air. He didn't know how to get his arms around what was happening, but he knew what he was going to do. He drew himself up and asked, "Madam Bones, how much do you know about what happened at the Department of Mysteries last month?"

She said curtly, "The things I know should not be discussed here."

Harry nodded; that was answer enough. "Then you know that I am already an adult."

Madam Bones closed her eyes. "I know that you have seen things most of us will never see, and have dealt with matters that most adults will never face. That does not mean that you are prepared for this manner of freedom."

"You sounded like Dumbledore just now," Harry said bitterly.

Madam Bones stiffened for a moment and then said in clipped tones, "I am no one's lackey, Mr. Potter. If Susan found herself in a similar situation, I would provide the same counsel."

"Mister Potter, do you intend to complete this transaction today, defer it until later, or walk away? This really must end," Fliptrask said.

"We can finish outside, sir," Harry said, adding, "Thank you for your time."

Fliptrask nodded curtly. "Mind your box," he said, motioning to the box still sitting on the stone slab. "The Trust Department of Gringotts is at your service."

Once back in the antechamber, Harry set the box on the desk and motioned to the scribe for a quill.

Diggle placed the addendum on the desk beside the box, and said excitedly, "Now, there are a number of technical items to be addressed, but we'll begin with the Will itself."

Harry rolled the quill in his fingers. "What about it?"

Diggle's top hat shook as he bobbed his head in excitement. "The Will consists of a general document, personal letters to each major beneficiary, and a series of addenda and appendices – most concerning you, of course."

Harry shook his head. "I didn't even ask what he left me."

Diggle said, "Oh, I think you'll be pleased. He's been arranging things for quite some time," as Harry glanced at the box.

"Here, here, and here," the scribe said absently.

Madam Bones placed her hand atop Harry's writing hand. "Harry, I can't prevent you from accepting Black's terms. I wouldn't do so even if I could; the decision is yours to make. Headmaster Dumbledore can't compel you in this matter, as technically you're not his ward at the moment, but I will say once more —"

"Madam Bones, I respect you — honestly, I do — so I'll put this as politely as possible. I want this," Harry said, nodding at the box, "and I don't much care what Dumbledore thinks. I've had my fill of his games, and his lies. If he wants me to save the world, then I do it on my terms. Mine." Madam Bones raised an eyebrow and Diggle took a surprised step back. Harry lowered the quill to the parchment.

Pounding on the outer door became more and more insistent. There were muffled cries as Harry affixed the third signature, and then the door flew off its hinges and into the room. Harry and the scribe dove behind the desk. As he peered around the desk Harry heard a familiar and unwelcome voice.

Dumbledore entered the office along with two very agitated goblins. "Good afternoon! Terribly sorry to startle everyone," he said genially. "Dedalus Diggle, how did you become ensnared in this? I must agree with Minerva on this account — no sense whatever. Amelia, are you all right? I am pleased that Harry was assigned as your charge; I hope that you were able to talk sense at... where is Harry? Amelia, tell me that you were able to make him understand? Harry? Where are you, Harry?"

A potent mix of anger and embarrassment coursed through Harry. "Dumbledore," he acknowledged, the signed copy of the will gripped tightly in his hand. The box on the desk shook slightly, and a wax seal

between the lid and the body of the box evaporated into wisps of red smoke.

Dumbledore's face sank and he whispered, "Sirius, what have you done to us?"

As the red smoke rose and dissipated, Dumbledore asked Harry, "Why?" Harry glared back; he gripped the signed Will and said nothing.

Dumbledore turned from Harry and sighed deeply. "I fear we shall have to interfere in the Dursleys' lives," he said.

Harry scowled. "You think they'll allow you to muck about with their lives? You know what they think of –"

"As we speak, I expect that the protections at Privet Drive are giving way – and this when they were stronger than they have ever been. And so I ask again: why?" For a brief instant, Harry felt a flash of the power and righteousness that Dumbledore had displayed at the Ministry for Magic.

Harry refused to wither. He snarled, "Because it was Sirius' right to give this to me, and it's my right to claim it."

"Did you consider the cost?" Dumbledore asked. "Is it worth the pain and suffering of others? The protection afforded you – the protection your mother gave her life to provide – was sealed when her sister took you in. Your willing acceptance of this emancipation may have been enough to unseal the charm, to lift the shield around you... the same shield that has been around the Dursleys."

"Dudley!" Harry exclaimed. Dedalus Diggle looked excitedly around the room and the scribe looked as though all of this was an everyday occurrence.

Dumbledore crooked an eyebrow. "What of your cousin? Is he in danger? Have you had a vision? Do you know something that would help him?"

A blush spread across Harry's cheeks. "He's at the Leaky Cauldron," he said.

"I am certain that I failed to hear you properly," said Dumbledore. "You brought your Muggle cousin here with you, and left him at the Leaky Cauldron?"

Harry nodded. "He insisted on it; he wouldn't let me leave Privet Drive without him."

"I credit him with some measure of good sense," Dumbledore said. "I presume this means that you left without explicit consent from your aunt?" He pulled his peculiar pocket watch from his robes. "I've not seen a Muggle train timetable in many a year, but I suspect some of our mutual friends are more familiar. As soon as they arrive, you may be on your way –"

"I'll be on my way now, I think," Harry said.

"It is not safe –" Dumbledore began.

Harry cut him off, "It's never been safe. I'm going to collect Dudley and we're going back to Surrey."

"I say this for your own good: you will wait for protection before leaving Gringotts. We will see to your cousin, I promise you," said Dumbledore.

"My department is responsible for the protection of Britain's magical citizens," Madam Bones said sharply. "Would you care to explain yourself, Albus?"

"Very well, Harry; it seems that you prefer to handle things in your own fashion." Dumbledore looked to his pocket watch again and added, "Do not linger... and be sure to mind the contents of that case. They may prove quite costly."

“Are you in actual danger?” Madam Bones asked Harry. He shrugged; danger was nothing new to him. He set the signed copy of Sirius’ will on the desk next to the box.

Harry looked to Diggle and said, “I need money – Muggle money. Is it possible to...?”

“Mr. Black was always prepared to, er, relocate without notice,” said Diggle. “Unless he changed the contents of the box since I last met with him, I believe that you’ll find your needs addressed.”

Harry fumbled with two catches, one on each side of the nondescript wooden box. He looked inside, and then looked again to be sure of what he was seeing before he quickly closed the lid.

Diggle took off his top hat and dabbed at his brow with a violet handkerchief. “Satisfactory, Mr. Potter?” he asked. Harry nodded.

Dumbledore gestured to his pocket watch, still frowning. The hidden door clicked open just then and Fliptrask called out angrily, “Did my ears deceive me, or did a wizard just destroy the entrance to my office? Wolfingham, contact security!” Madam Bones crossed her arms and tapped her foot, and Dumbledore appeared abashed. Harry edged out of the office just as a half-dozen security goblins entered the corridor.

To his credit, Dudley was not in hysterics when Harry returned to the parlour at the Leaky Cauldron. Tom gave him a mild tongue-lashing for taking so long, to which Harry didn’t object. Neither Dudley nor Harry spoke until they had reached King’s Cross and boarded the train to Surrey.

No one took a seat within a dozen rows of him, which Harry thought highly unlikely amidst general seating at the close of business. He let his eyes sweep the car and saw a flicker of Auror’s robes for an instant but no black robes or white masks. There was some sort of Muggle aversion charm that didn’t affect Dudley; Harry was impressed and curious.

“How’s your friend?” Dudley abruptly asked.

Harry, lost in thought, said, “What?”

Dudley rolled his eyes. “Your friend, the one in trouble – how is she?”

“Fine... frightened but fine,” said Harry.

They were silent a while longer. As the train cleared the centre city and began to accelerate, Harry said, “I’ve made a mess of things.”

Dudley’s small eyes narrowed. “Damn right you did, you git! You left me in that loony bin with those nutters for nigh on two hours! Some of ‘em were going spare, I tell you, talking about killing mutts or mingles or something!”

Harry shook his head. “Not what I meant, though I’m sorry for taking so long – I meant the business at the bank.”

Dudley’s hands tightened. “Are you telling me you’re not good for it?”

“No, no, I signed the will. I have enough money to replace everything, more than enough,” said Harry. “That’s not the problem. I signed the will, Dudley. I’m sorry. I’m really, really sorry.” He opened Sirius’s box and took out one of a half-dozen tan envelopes marked Pounds that were stuck to the inside of the lid. After thumbing through the contents, he tossed a wrapped bundle of bank notes onto Dudley’s lap.

Dudley glanced down, then back up, and then back down again, and then slipped out a note to hold it against the sunlight that streamed through the windows. “These are real fifty-pound notes! A whole bundle of ... that’s five – thousand – bloody - pounds!” None of the Muggles took any notice of Dudley’s shriek.

Harry saw the Auror’s robes again for a moment. He set the box on his lap and let his chin rest against the edge of the open lid. “I hope that will cover it,” he said softly.

Dudley laughed, "Cover it? Yes, that'll cover it! I guess you do keep your word, Potter."

Harry took a deep breath and felt like he was about to be sick. He realised that he looked it when Dudley said, "If you're going to spew up, then head for the loo!"

Harry squirmed in his seat. "I've been emancipated."

"Emanciwhatted?" Dudley asked.

"Emancipated," Harry repeated. "It means I've been made a legal adult because of the will... and I signed it."

Dudley pulled a pained face that Harry recognized from their revising sessions. "So what's the problem?" he asked. "Congratulations, I suppose – you can do whatever you want, isn't that it?"

"Dumbledore has probably sent people to Privet Drive. He said it wasn't safe anymore. You might have to be moved. Do you understand, Dudley? I'm an adult now."

Dudley's eyes widened and his eyebrows rose as it sunk in. "How... how long until we're to Little Whinging?" he asked.

"I don't know; I didn't keep the timetable –" Harry started.

Dudley grabbed Harry by the front of his shirt. "How long? We need to get there NOW!"

The Auror's robes came into plain view next to Dudley. The man wearing the robes looked vaguely familiar to Harry, which was enough for him to slip away his wand; he remembered seeing an Auror sometime or another with thick tawny hair and golden eyes. "Is there a problem here?" the man asked.

"My aunt and uncle may be in danger," Harry admitted.

The Auror nodded slowly. "How long will this train take to reach your destination?"

"It took more than an hour on the way in – that's too long!" Dudley snapped.

The Auror sat down across the aisle from Dudley and extended a hand. "I'm Rufus Scrimgeour, boy. I work for Amelia Bones... which means nothing to you, I know, but young Potter here understands." Dudley managed to take Scrimgeour's hand but only gave a strangled sound in reply; it seemed that only then had he noticed Scrimgeour was clad in robes.

"Scrimgeour... wait... you're the Head Auror, aren't you?" Harry asked. "Why are you here?"

"Amelia asked if I might fancy a train ride," Scrimgeour said. "She wasn't in a trusting mood after crossing Dumbledore at Gringotts. I have faith in her moods. Do you honestly believe that your relations are in danger?"

Harry tried to explain without really explaining. "They're... protected... or they have been, and... er... I did something and they might not be protected anymore..."

Scrimgeour gave a faint smile. "The old man did some ward work, did he? Amelia did tell me of your change in status..." He ran long fingers through his beard several times before he said, "Blood wards... he must have laid blood wards of some sort – that would explain a great many things. I'd send someone or give a look myself, but we don't know precisely where you live; we know the general vicinity of course, owing to owls and such. The best thing for it is apparation to the area. I'll side-along you and then have you point me in the right direction. If there's been a ward collapse of some sort, we can either remove your relations from the home or leave a contingent while we arrange protection."

"Sorry... 'side-along'?" Harry asked.

Scrimgeour's brow creased. "Side-along apparation – you've not heard of it?" When Harry shook his head, the Auror explained, "It's possible to take along another person when apparating. Most wizards can't manage it, and a specialised license is required. A few of us can take two in a single go. I'd rather not attempt to side-along a Muggle, though – no offence, boy, but it would put you at some risk."

Harry blurted out, "What name does the Minister call his personal assistant by?"

Scrimgeour chortled, "Checking for Polyjuice? Good on you! Such a question, though... I know his assistant is Arthur Weasley's boy – couldn't tell you his given name – but the Minister does call him by the wrong surname, as I think on it... 'Wolstenby' or something of the like? Leave it to Cornelius – I'd feel sorry for the Weasley boy actually if he weren't such an uptight priss. He's nothing at all like Arthur, not in the least." He searched Harry's face. "Do I meet with your approval?"

"Dudley? He can get me there in seconds," Harry said.

Dudley nodded. "I'll be there straight away from the station," he said.

"I don't want to see them hurt, honestly," Harry said.

Dudley responded solemnly, "I believe you, Potter."

Harry once again left his Invisibility Cloak. "Just in case, right?"

Dudley ran the Cloak through his hands and smirked. "I wouldn't want to be you, but this would be dead useful."

"Look after it carefully, boy," Scrimgeour warned; "Those are quite rare and there'd be a good deal of trouble if you let it stray. If there's any sort of problem, you'll be met at the station either by myself or another man called Williamson. He'll be wearing similar robes." He broke a glittering metallic circle in half and handed one portion to Dudley. "If the person who meets you doesn't present the other half

of this, run as fast as you can and hide yourself with that Cloak – understood?”

Dudley pocketed the half-circle and said, “Just get to my mum and dad, please?”

Scrimgeour patted Dudley on the shoulder and then turned to Harry. “Obviously you’ve never apparated before. It’s not the most pleasant thing you’ll ever do. Close your eyes now – it’s for the best,” he said as he grabbed Harry’s arm.

There was a faint pop! and then Harry felt as though he was being squeezed through a thin, hollow tube. He couldn’t imagine that anyone would welcome the feeling. There was no sense of time – the squeezing might have lasted a second or a year. At the end, it was as though he was spat from the end of the tube. His eyes crossed. He and Scrimgeour were behind a tree along Magnolia Road.

Scrimgeour gave him a quick once-over. “You don’t seem to have left anything behind. So... are you game, Potter?”

The meaning of emancipation dawned on Harry, and he drew his wand. “I... I can use it now, right?” he said excitedly.

“I wouldn’t go throwing magic about if I were you, but yes, you’re allowed,” Scrimgeour said. “Did anyone remove the monitoring charm from your wand? I take that as ‘no’. Hold the wand at arm’s length, would you?” Harry did as he was told, and Scrimgeour waggled his own wand oddly; there was a brief flash accompanied by a hum.

“Congratulations, you’re a man now – don’t squander it,” Scrimgeour said. “When we get in sight of the house, I’m going to Disillusion you. Keep a distance and I’ll signal you if it’s secure. Before all of that, though, you need to get us there.” The Auror waved his wand at himself and his robes and cloak were transfigured into a Muggle business suit that seemed slightly out-of-date to Harry.

Harry glanced down and winced. “Erm, Mr. Scrimgeour, your boots...?”

“Blast!” Scrimgeour waved his wand a second time and black formal shoes replaced his boots. He grumbled, “I despise Muggle footwear.”

When they reached the corner of Privet Drive, Scrimgeour scratched his head. “Why are all these wizards about? That’s Minerva McGonagall... that couldn’t be Filius Flitwick, could it? What is that he’s wearing on his head?” He turned to Harry. “Unless someone brewed a dozen cauldrons of Polyjuice, I’d have to say that the area is secure. I don’t see a need to Disillusion you just now, but I’ll want an explanation for this.”

Professor McGonagall was clad in a very plain dress that fell to the tops of her very sensible shoes, and her hair was pulled tightly into its usual bun. She walked slowly along the drive of Number Four with her right hand extended and moving from side to side. Professor Flitwick was dressed like a young boy; he wore denims, a sporting shirt of some sort and a ManU cap pulled low on his head. Bill Weasley was there as well, with his long hair tucked up in a cap and looking rather like a handyman with coveralls and a tool belt. Aunt Petunia sat on the stoop and hawkishly watched the proceedings.

McGonagall looked up and gave a start. “Rufus? What in Merlin’s name are you doing here?”

Scrimgeour frowned. “Who’s Merlin, madam?” he said loudly. “I believe I’ve heard the name in some fanciful tale or another.”

McGonagall quickly recovered. “We’ve cast a Muggle aversion charm as well as an obscuring ward. The clothing is merely a precaution.”

“I’m rather surprised to see you here,” Scrimgeour went on. “This is a matter for the DMLE. I can’t imagine how this interests a group of educators...” His eyes lingered on Bill Weasley for a moment before he finished sharply, “...and others?”

“The staff of Hogwarts holds a great interest in the welfare of our students,” McGonagall said briskly.

Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed. "In some more than others," he said. "Are you certain that your aversion charm was strong enough for the job?" With a wave of his wand, the air around the front yard shimmered. A clutch of Muggle children playing down the drive looked around in confusion and wandered away.

McGonagall's lips thinned. "The charm was sufficient, and Hogwarts pays special mind to Muggle-born students given the times in which we live."

"I agree with the sentiment but young Potter isn't Muggle-born, is he?" Scrimgeour pointed out. "If you explain to me why the old man sent you here, then perhaps I won't have to send for an Auror squad... which would require me to send for the Muggle Artifacts office, and someone from Magical Mishaps... and that would require others, naturally..."

"I remember you well from your school days, Rufus. Have your transfigurations improved with time? I'm certain you learnt a good deal at Hogwarts, but coercion and disrespect were not amongst the tuition," McGonagall said coldly. "You know who we are, why we're here and what we represent, so may we dispense with further pleasantries?"

"The position on You-Know-Who for the last year was absurd – I'd swear an oath to that," Scrimgeour snapped; "Delores Umbridge used my Aurors to stage an attack on you and I shan't forget it. I was sickened, the men involved have been disciplined, and you have my sincere apology. That aside, you can't expect the Ministry to condone vigilantism! The D.F.D.L. were little more than vigilantes twenty years ago, and that's why they're being brought into the fold this time. Wizards need to speak with one voice on this –"

"– And when that voice is ready to speak in something more than empty-headed nonsense, perhaps I'll feel differently?" McGonagall returned. "I'd like to speak with my student, if you please?"

Scrimgeour looked to Harry. "I'll fetch your cousin, Potter," he said. "Keep your wand in hand. Feel free to cast anything short of an

Unforgivable to protect yourself – from anyone.” He stopped a few paces away, and added, “This isn’t finished, Professor.”

“I feared as much,” McGonagall said under her breath, before she turned her most formidable glare on Harry.

Harry winced. “Good afternoon, Professor McGonagall,” he managed.

McGonagall snapped, “Did the consequences of your actions occur to you for even one moment, Potter?”

“I – I – I –” Harry began, uncertain what to say.

“Have you anything intelligible to offer?” she asked coldly.

Harry cleared his throat and asked, “If the wards fell, shouldn’t you have left here with Aunt Petunia?”

“The wards haven’t fallen,” McGonagall said. She wiped her brow in consternation. “We have thoroughly examined this entire property. Despite the expectations of myself, Professor Flitwick and Professor Dumbledore, the protections remain intact.” She leaned in, a griffin prepared to pounce. “What do you think is at work here? An answer, now, if you please.”

Harry thought for a while before he began to stumble through an explanation. “The protections were built on blood ties. The blood ties haven’t changed, simply because of the will. So...” The professor shook her head. “So ruling that out... the protections weren’t up to me. I’m in the blood line, but the seal was between my mother and Aunt Petunia...” He hesitated, before seeing the answer. “...and now it’s between the Dursleys and me. The protections are still in place because I want them to remain.”

Professor McGonagall nodded. “That strikes me as the most likely explanation, although Professor Dumbledore will surely weigh in.”

Aunt Petunia, who had left the stoop, cleared her throat. “Are – are you saying that... I, I don’t understand... I...”

Harry said, "I can't be protected anymore. Dumbledore..."

"Professor Dumbledore," McGonagall interjected.

Harry scowled. "Dumbledore knows it. He tried to protect me for five years, and it all came crashing down. It's finished now." Turning to McGonagall, he added, "It was finished whether or not I signed Sirius' will. You know that." The professor said nothing.

Harry continued, "You have to be protected, though. You can't defend yourselves against the Death Eaters or Voldemort –" Aunt Petunia flinched at that, and Professor McGonagall breathed in sharply. "He will use anything or anyone to get at me, including you. Thank your son for this. A year ago, I might have walked away without a thought." His aunt's mouth opened but no words came out.

"I know that you hate what I am, Aunt Petunia, and I'm sorry for that," Harry said, trying to assume the bearing that came naturally to his Head of House. "I don't know if I'll be back next year, or for how long. It's possible that this will be the last time you ever see me. There are things I have to do –"

McGonagall said, "You'd best stop at that, Potter."

Harry nodded but never took his eyes away from his aunt. "It will be very dangerous for me from now on," he said.

Aunt Petunia closed her eyes tightly. She said, "I was so jealous of her – always the pretty one, the smart one, the popular one. If I'd any idea how it would turn out, I would have... but I didn't know – well, I knew it was freakish and wrong, but the danger – I really didn't know... what I'm saying is, be safe if you can." She reached out and clasped his hand. "Harry –", Aunt Petunia said, her voice reduced to a strangled whisper, "I want revenge... for my parents... and for my sister." Harry reeled – acknowledging his mother was odd enough, but what did she mean by asking revenge for her parents?

"MUM!"

Harry spun to see Dudley running well ahead of Scrimgeour, who moved with a loping, limping gait. His aunt's face lit in a way that he had rarely seen. Dudley clasped her hands as he caught his breath.

Dudley looked to Harry with wide eyes. "The other fellow, he said everything's fine. Is that true?"

Harry nodded. "Nothing happened, nothing at all."

"What on Earth were you thinking, Dudley?" Aunt Petunia scolded.

Dudley shrugged. "Potter was making good on my training equipment, Mum. I took him to his bank."

Aunt Petunia's eyebrows rose. "Bank? The boy has an account with a bank?"

"My godfather left me an inheritance," Harry said. "I couldn't leave Dudley without his weights and the rest – it wouldn't have been right."

"Well... well... I see... that's for the best, I suppose..." Aunt Petunia stammered.

Harry reached out to shake Dudley's hand. "You have the money?" he asked.

Dudley quickly nodded. "Uh – yeah! It's in my pocket."

Harry nodded. "Good. If you need to reach me – if anything happens, you can send post through... err..."

"I know how to send post to... that place," Aunt Petunia said.

Harry asked McGonagall, "Professor, will the Order maintain watch on this house?"

"At your request, I suspect that they will," she replied.

“Good. I’d like a small watch at Dudley’s school, as well,” Harry added.

McGonagall told him, “The protections move with your relatives, Potter – at least they did. Failing that, your uncle couldn’t have worked and your cousin couldn’t have attended school.”

There was a thump and a loud crack! as Harry’s own school trunk bounced on the stoop. Tonks bounded down the stairs after it. She was dressed in such a way that even Uncle Vernon wouldn’t have been flustered – her hair was black and straight, and she wore clothes suitable for Fleet Street. “Wotcher, Harry. Long time between owls,” she said. Her head cocked to one side, and she looked him up and down. “Filled out a bit, I see,” she added. “Your fan club should be in a flutter, eh?”

Scrimgeour arrived at last, breathing heavily. He crossed his arms and said, “Good afternoon, Miss Tonks.”

Her eyes went wide. “Auror Scrimgeour! I didn’t –”

“Expect to see me?” Scrimgeour finished for her. “I see we have evidence of your membership in Dumbledore’s organisation?”

Tonks stood up straighter. “I never denied it,” she said.

Scrimgeour pursed his lips. “Yes, you were nearly forthcoming – after you were caught out. You could have retained your commission in a trice, Tonks. All you had to do was renounce your membership and offer a public apology –”

“ – And I’ve repeatedly refused, sir,” said Tonks. “I can’t take the easy choice, not this time.”

“To your credit, Tonks... to your credit,” Scrimgeour allowed, and he extended a hand. “I do believe we’re still on the same side of things, even if I disagree wholeheartedly with the old man. If we should ever have need of your talents... on an unofficial basis, of course...?” Tonks took his hand lightly and gave a slight nod.

He returned his attentions to McGonagall. "You have thirty minutes to finish whatever it is you've started here. Beyond that time, this is a DMLE matter," he announced.

"It was a pleasure, Rufus," McGonagall said tightly.

"Professor," Scrimgeour returned.

Tonks broke the long silence after the Head Auror reached the corner of Privet Drive and disappeared into the shrubbery. "We should move along," she said to Harry.

"You lost your job?" Harry confirmed.

Tonks waved him off. "Later," she said.

Aunt Petunia put her hand on Harry's arm, which startled him. She said, "It would be best if you weren't here when Vernon returns. Dudley, there is a small trunk in the kitchen; bring it to Harry, please."

Dudley returned with a worn wooden trunk, unmistakably marked with the crest of Gryffindor house. Aunt Petunia looked around at anything but Harry. "This trunk does not belong here... best that it leave with you," she said.

"Professor McGonagall, I need to repair the cellar," Harry said. "It'll only take a moment."

McGonagall said, "If you're referring to the damage caused by your unfortunate emission, I have already resolved that."

Tonks grinned and asked, "Having control problems, Harry?" Dudley instantly snorted.

"Yes, and that will have to be addressed firmly. You need to learn patience, Potter," said McGonagall firmly. She crooked an eyebrow at Dudley, who had his hands over his mouth to hold in the howls. "It's really not funny, young man. Uncontrolled nocturnal emissions can

indicate a serious problem.” Dudley squeezed his eyes shut, and Aunt Petunia’s cheeks reddened.

“May we go now?” asked Harry through clenched teeth. Dudley half-waved and Aunt Petunia nodded curtly as Harry and Tonks made their way down the drive to the road. Each step took Harry further from Privet Drive and closer to the wizarding world. He didn’t find that as reassuring as in previous years.

"You're all right coming with me?" Tonks asked.

Harry said with a shrug, "I've nowhere else to go just now. Where are we headed... not Grimmauld Place, I hope?"

“That’s not somewhere for either of us, eh? Not yet, at least,” Tonks said with a frown.

She led him to the strangest looking vehicle he had ever seen. It had only one door – set in the front, no less – and two seats. “There’s no boot, but we’ll make do,” she said. There was a rack on the back of it, and she lashed Harry’s trunk into place.

“Er... what is this?” Harry asked.

“It’s a car,” Tonks snorted. “You’ve heard of those?”

Harry scratched his head. “But it’s... it’s... er...”

Tonks patted the side of the thing lovingly. “Wicked, isn’t it?”

“And you drive this... um... yourself?” asked Harry nervously.

“Quick today, aren’t you?” Tonks said. “My dad gave it to me when I finished the Auror program.”

The car looked quite old, he thought, but well cared-for. He squinted at the front door. He searched it for dents and creases, and wondered aloud, “How well do you drive, then?”

She elbowed him and said with a saucy grin, "I thought you were always one for an adventure?"

Chapter Three

INTO THE LION'S DEN

Harry quickly decided it was better to keep his eyes fixed on the floor than to close them. Tonks was fond of quick lane changes despite the fact that her car – and it was a stretch to call it that, he thought – groaned and creaked every time she took to the accelerator pedal. She had a colourful vocabulary and no patience whatever. They were caught on a roundabout for several minutes before she fought her way off by tearing across three lanes of solid traffic. As they pressed deeper into London, the ancient streets lost their grid.

“Should I double park or triple park, I wonder?” Tonks snapped at no one in particular. Harry hadn’t the faintest idea how to help. The roads were a crazy quilt of red lines, double yellows, bus lanes and parking restrictions.

Tonks began to mutter, “Nothing there... no, nothing there... blast, that one’s for disabled... residents only... has to be a bloody meter around here...”

“There’s one!” Harry said excitedly.

Tonks shook her head. “Uh-uh. Can’t use that colour... I don’t think that... THERE!” She tromped on the accelerator, the car spluttered and puffed, and she veered across the road to a symphony of horns. Harry wished for a braking charm and settled for silent prayer as the car slid sideways into a metered spot and stopped with a hard thump against the kerb. He tore off his belt before Tonks cut the motor and scrambled out the door as if the car was cursed.

Tonks stumbled out and growled at the meter, “A quid for twenty minutes? That’s theft, that is!”

“Where are we?” asked Harry. He hadn’t bothered to look around until just then. They were on a street of what looked to be grand old houses turned to businesses.

“My place,” Tonks said, and then added, “Well, strictly speaking it’s my parents’ place... ehh, you’ll see. Let’s fetch your trunk, then. Wouldn’t want it to be nicked, eh?”

Three doors down, a modest sign in front of a three-storey home said:

Astonbury, Grendel, Tonks & Levy, LLP

General and Commercial Law – Wealth Management

“My Mum and Dad live above, and I’m back in the mews,” Tonks explained, but Harry wasn’t certain what she meant by that.

Before Tonks could open the front door, Harry stopped her. “Isn’t it dangerous, you know... to bring me here?” he asked.

Tonks shrugged. “It’s unexpected, and that makes it a bit safer. At any rate, you’ll not be here long,” she said.

The front door whipped open and Harry had his wand half drawn before Tonks seized him by the shoulder. Mad-Eye Moody peeked out the opening. “Coming in, or would you rather stand there as live targets?” he grunted. Tonks rolled her eyes, even as she shoved Harry through the doorway with the help of his own trunk.

“You’re fifteen minutes late,” Moody said. “I suppose it’s the fault of that fool’s contraption of yours?” Harry nearly agreed aloud with Moody’s assessment of the car until Tonks’ eyes narrowed.

“They’ve arrived, have they?” a pleasant voice called from just beyond the entry hall.

The voice belonged to an unmistakeable Black. “You must be Tonks’s mum?” Harry said.

She came forward and extended her hand even as she looked him up and down. “Andromeda Tonks... Nymphadora was right – you do resemble your father, as I recall him,” she said. She was tall and slim

and her features were more like Narcissa Malfoy than Sirius, but her hair was brown with tracings of grey.

“Er... people do say that,” Harry offered. “Look, it’s not really safe for me to be here. It’s all right if you –”

Mrs. Tonks gave a wan smile. “We avoided most of the first war, but I doubt we’ll be out of the fray this time around,” she said with a meaningful glance toward Tonks. “Honestly, H... may I call you Harry?”

“Uh, of course,” Harry said quickly.

“ Honestly, Harry,” she repeated, “you’re welcome here. Nymphadora, would you rather he stay here or in the mews?”

“Anywhere is fine, Mrs. Tonks,” Harry insisted. “I wouldn’t want to be a bother to you, or to the other people on the sign.”

“Other people...? Oh, you’re referring to Astonbury and Grendel? This is a very old firm, Harry. Mr. Astonbury founded it in the 1890s and the brothers Grendel joined him in 1914 and 1921, respectively,” Mrs. Tonks explained. “Tenbrooke Grendel is still alive – he was the magical one of the two – but he rarely stops in. Gabriel Levy is our other partner; he ran the firm entirely whilst we were abroad. He’s working in Golders Green this week, so I wouldn’t expect to –”

“You’re babbling, Mum,” Tonks cut in, drawing a frown from her mother. “There’s no need to put Harry up; we won’t be long. Is Remus out in the mews?”

“He’s in the kitchen, taking tea with your father,” Mrs. Tonks said. “He doesn’t seem well, dear...”

“He’s rarely well,” Tonks sighed.

The kitchen was pleasantly messy, Harry thought – more Burrow than Privet Drive. Remus Lupin sat with his back to the entry. The man

across the table squinted and stood. "Harry Potter, we meet at last," he said. "Ted Tonks; I'm Dora's father."

Lupin spun awkwardly in his chair. His face was weathered and hard, and Harry felt a confused rush of emotions at the sight of him – sadness, guilt, anger, and regret. "Hello, Harry," he said, his voice faint and hollow.

"Professor –" Harry began.

Lupin waved him off. "Just Lupin, Harry, or Remus if you like," he said.

"Er... Remus... I –" Harry started again.

"We'll have time to talk later," Lupin said. "We should be on our way. Ted, I thank you for your hospitality."

"No worries, Remus," Mr. Tonks said. He turned to Harry with an appraising eye. "I understand from Remus that you may be facing quite a complicated inheritance, Mr. Potter. He didn't know whether you had representation in place."

"I've been to Gringotts already," said Harry. "They had Dedalus Diggle there. Madam Bones was there, too."

Lupin's eyes widened. "Amelia Bones?"

"Diggle?" Mr. Tonks snorted. "The goblins hired Diggle? I wonder what they're up to. Dedalus is a nice enough fellow but he can be a bit, eh, imprecise. If it were me, I wouldn't set him to address something as important as the Potter estate."

"This wasn't about my parents' will," Harry said. "This was about Sirius."

Mr. Tonks's eyebrows shot up. "Sirius? Sirius Black?"

Mrs. Tonks pulled at Harry by the shoulder. "Get out," she said firmly.

“I... I don’t understand...” Harry said.

Tonks pulled at her mother. “Mum, there’s a lot you don’t know.”

“I know enough, thank you!” Mrs. Tonks shouted. “When your sisters and your closest cousins all join the Death Eaters, then you can tell me what I know and don’t know!”

“Sirius was many things, but he was no Death Eater,” Lupin said calmly.

Mrs. Tonks railed onward, “If you’ve anything to do with my cousin, then you’re surely not Harry Potter! Get out! Get out, all three of you!”

“You never told them?” Remus asked Tonks.

“I know how to keep a secret!” Tonks shot back. She stared at her mother, then scrunched up her face and let her hair turn violet and long. “It’s me, Mum – I’m no impostor,” she said.

Harry insisted, “Sirius didn’t give up my parents; Peter Pettigrew did!”

“Pettigrew? Isn’t that the chap your cousin was supposed to have blown up?” Mr. Tonks asked.

“I’m afraid it’s true,” Remus said sadly. “Sirius was wrongfully imprisoned for twelve years.”

“But... it couldn’t... how...?” Mrs. Tonks stammered.

“We were wrong,” said Remus. “I thought him guilty, even Albus Dumbledore thought him guilty, but it was Peter all along. He was the betrayer, not Sirius.” Tonks guided her mother to a chair at the table.

“It’s... it’s a lot to take in...” Mrs. Tonks managed.

“Obviously you’ve been in contact with Sirius,” Mr. Tonks said. “Dora, have you been helping him hide away?” Tonks quickly looked away.

“A group of us, including Dumbledore, helped Sirius evade the Ministry for two years,” Lupin explained.

Mrs. Tonks wiped at her eyes. “I want to see him,” she said.

Harry and Lupin both froze. “So do I,” Tonks choked out.

Mr. Tonks said, “Oh, dear” a moment before Mrs. Tonks began to shake. Tonks knelt and embraced her.

“I’m sorry,” Harry managed to say. Lupin took an uncomfortable look at his watch and gave Tonks a glance.

“I can’t leave just now,” Tonks whispered.

Lupin nodded. “You know where to meet us,” he said. Harry returned to the entry to collect his trunk. Somehow it had come ajar - probably from the bumping around on the back of that stupid car, he thought - so he forced his clothing back into place and applied a locking charm this time. This time, it occurred to him that he could shrink the trunk himself; he slipped it into a pocket and silently followed Lupin to the mews behind the house. There was a fireplace inside, and they spun their way to a scruffy-looking pub in Manchester, and then what looked to be a manor house, and finally to a seaside inn. From there they hired a car – Harry paid, as Lupin had left the necessary pounds with Tonks – and rode for an hour into the countryside. The driver left them at the end of a drive that disappeared into deep woods. Lupin paid the fare and a healthy tip before he obliviated the man, who cheerfully drove off.

Harry followed Lupin down the drive. The trees were so dense that they needed a light spell to cut the darkness, even though it was still two hours to sunset. After a few minutes, Lupin held up a hand to stop Harry.

“We’ve reached the ward perimeter,” Lupin said. “Let’s be certain that they’re tuned properly before we go on, right?” He gave his wand a complicated waggle and a hazy yellow light shimmered across two of the trees. Apparently he was satisfied, as he waved Harry forward. The ward pressed in on Harry for a moment and he struggled to take a breath; just as quickly it let him free.

Lupin noticeably relaxed. “Welcome to the Lion’s Den,” he said. There was a cottage before them set in a clearing; both cottage and clearing had completely escaped Harry’s notice. “We’ve set up safe houses around Britain these last weeks,” Lupin went on. “The old place sealed itself after Sirius... well, it had been compromised in any case. Tonks and I are the only ones to know of this one, and Dumbledore of course. There are facilities for me here, and... and let’s get you inside. You’ve had a long day, apparently.”

As Lupin opened the front door, he added, “Ahh, there are two others who are in on the secret – I nearly forgot.”

Harry nearly lost his balance as a small blur struck his lower legs. “Dobby?”

Dobby let go and gave a little skip. “Dobby is so very happy to see Harry Potter! Harry Potter is a grown wizard, so Dobby can now serve him!” Dobby bowed down to Harry and his face nearly dragged the floorboards. The two hats he was wearing both slipped off.

“A grown wizard? Harry doesn’t reach his majority for another year,” said Lupin.

Dobby crossed his arms and shook his head. “Harry Potter is a grown wizard. He has the wand of a grown wizard. He has the mark of a grown wizard. Mister Wolf cannot see this?”

Lupin’s brow furrowed. “Might we discuss what happened at Gringotts, Harry?” he asked.

Dobby's eyes lit. "Oh, Dobby forgets his manners! Welcome to the home of Harry Potter, sir," he announced. "May Dobby receive your cloak and provide refreshment?"

"This isn't exactly my home," Harry said with a chuckle.

"Harry Potter is in this home and this home is for Harry Potter, so this is the home of Harry Potter," Dobby said firmly.

"Well, this isn't a cloak, Dobby, this is a jacket. Still, you may hang it if you like," Lupin said. He took off his tweed jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his oxford.

"I'd take a butterbeer," Harry said.

Dobby winced. "I am sorry, but there is no butterbeer in the home of Harry Potter. It has been removed. I would offer pumpkin juice, if it does not offend?" Harry nodded and the house-elf disappeared with a snap.

Harry looked around the cottage. It was small and spartan. The narrow entry opened into a small living room with a few bookshelves and stairs that went up to sleeping rooms on the first floor.

Dobby reappeared by his side. "Pumpkin juice and a snack have been set out in the kitchen for the sirs," he said, bowing again.

"Dobby, there's no need for that, honestly," said Harry.

Dobby gave a fierce shake of his head. "Dobby may be a free elf but he is still a proper servant."

The kitchen was large enough for a rough-hewn dining table and a hutch. Juice, glasses and two plates of small sandwiches and cookies were set out. Harry wasted no time fetching a glass.

"I hope this is to your liking, Master Harry, sir," a very high squeaky voice quivered. Winky was clad in a skirt and blouse as at Hogwarts,

though they were cleaner than Harry recalled. That explains the lack of butterbeer, he thought.

“Very much so, Winky,” Harry said with a smile.

The house-elf looked down at the floor. “Dobby thought I should come with Dobby to work for Harry Potter, sir. Dobby told Professor Dumbledore we was quitting Hogwarts, but didn’t tell Winky. Dobby often thinks above his station.” The house-elf’s huge brown eyes began to water. “I don’t want paying, sir. If Winky’s presence displeases...”

Harry slipped from his chair and knelt in front of Winky, who took a startled step backward. “Welcome,” he said. Winky curtsied and looked away.

Dobby re-entered the kitchen. “To your liking, sirs?” he asked.

Lupin nodded and Harry asked Dobby, “I don’t understand why you’re here. I mean, you had a job at Hogwarts, and how did you find out about this place, anyway?”

Dobby tapped his index finger to his forehead. “Dobby is always thinking these days, sir. Dobby heard from Professor Dumbledore that Harry Potter would be coming to this house, on account of what happened to Mister Sirius Black. Dobby is so sorry, sir. Harry Potter must be very sad!”

Harry cut him off firmly. “Go on,” he commanded.

“There was quite a commotion at Hogwarts this day, sir,” said Dobby. “Much unpleasantness, very upset people... Dobby brought tea to Professor Dumbledore in his study, and overheard...” The house-elf went rigid, then quivered and banged his head repeatedly against the side of the table. “Bad Dobby! Bad Dobby!” Harry grabbed Dobby by the arm and pulled him back; the house-elf took a moment to regain his footing.

“I don’t need to know what you heard at Hogwarts, Dobby,” Harry said. “I was interested in how you came here, that’s all.”

“Dobby asked Professor Dumbledore if he could serve Harry Potter, told him he would work for free just to have the chance. Professor Dumbledore told Dobby this would be a good idea, if Dobby were willing to bind to Harry Potter and not to a house. Dobby reminder Professor Dumbledore that he is free and can only bind himself.” The house-elf bounced up and down like a child before a stack of Christmas presents. “Dobby chooses Harry Potter!”

“What about Winky?” Harry asked.

Dobby looked down at his socks. “Winky needs Dobby, Master Harry, sir. Winky is better, but Winky is not strong. Winky needs Dobby, sir.”

Harry couldn’t resist teasing. “Does Dobby need Winky?” he asked.

“Dobby... does not have an answer, Harry Potter,” Dobby said uneasily. “Winky and Dobby will make this home worthy of Harry Potter – Dobby promises that.”

“I’ll be in the living room,” Lupin said abruptly. “Why don’t you find a room and put your things away?”

When Harry returned to the living room, he found his former Professor looking out the window, deep in thought. He wasn’t certain if he should speak, but Lupin turned and motioned for Harry to sit.

“Would you tell me about Gringotts now?” Lupin asked.

Harry recounted the day’s events and Lupin listened impassively. When he finished, he went quiet for a long while and then added, “I miss him.”

“I miss him as well,” Lupin said, “even though he’s just pulled the biggest prank of his life – and believe me, Harry, Sirius pulled some whopping pranks in his time. It’s just like him, to stir up everything and then walk away.”

Anger lit inside of Harry and rage swelled, filling the empty places. "He didn't walk away! That – that bitch Lestrangle shoved him through the veil, in case you've forgotten!"

Lupin said calmly, "I know very well what happened. I'm simply telling you that Sirius enjoyed setting up pranks that came to fruition after he left the scene. Most of the time, your father was his partner in crime. I remember once, after the Halloween Ball, the two of them –" He stopped, gazing across the room at the mantle as though it were a pensive.

"Where is this going?" Harry asked wearily.

"I loved Sirius like a brother – we all did. But he was a child trapped in an adult body. He was selfish, judgmental, impetuous, demanding... and when he wrote his will, he was trapped. Dumbledore wouldn't let him leave, not even for a moment. He hated that house with every fibre of his being. I imagine that in some ways, it was worse for him at Grimmauld Place than in Azkaban. He didn't trust Dumbledore at all on matters that concerned you. I think he felt that Dumbledore was doing the same thing to you – trapping you in a horrible place, because he felt it was for your own good."

"So you think that Sirius did this to get back at Dumbledore?" Harry asked. "You don't think he might have done this because he thought that I was ready for it?" The rage still flickered inside of him, waiting for Lupin to provide it a window of escape.

Lupin sighed. "Harry, you have been Sirius' opposite in so many ways. You've been a man trapped in a child's body. No child should have had to face what you have; yet you've managed it. I think Sirius saw that in you, and yes, I suspect he thought that you were ready to govern your own affairs. I also suspect he remembered James, and remembered how strong he was. Your father did have an old soul, Harry, but he didn't face anything like you have until he was in his seventh year. You're not your father, Harry. At least, you don't have to be."

Harry said dangerously, "What do you mean by that?"

Lupin looked at Harry for a long time. Harry couldn't remember ever being so unnerved by someone's eyes – they were sad and happy, judgmental and forgiving all at once. Finally he said, "Your father was capable of cruelty. You haven't shown that trait – at least not regularly. He could be terribly judgmental. Goodness, he could hold a grudge! He could be rash, although not as rash as Sirius. He didn't trust easily, either, and his trust could be quickly shaken. That cost him dearly, Harry. He – he paid a terrible price, as terrible as any person could ever pay. You're not your father, Harry. Don't make his mistakes."

Harry stood bolt upright. "What gives you the right to talk about my father that way? I don't need to hear this!"

"Yes, I think you do," said Lupin calmly. "You're so angry, Harry. Most of the people around you can see that, even if they haven't experienced it. My kind... we can sense anger and pain more acutely than humans. I can feel it, Harry, the pain inside you. I felt that same anger, that searing sense of betrayal inside your father, when his parents were killed. It clouded his judgment, ate away at his trust, and drove people away. It started James on a path. Other events fed that path, as well, but you know where it ultimately led."

The rage in Harry began to melt into something else. I won't cry in front of him, he thought. I won't!

Lupin moved to sit next to Harry and awkwardly put an arm around his shoulders. "I'm not your guardian, Harry. It seems as though Sirius has asked me to shoulder some responsibility for you, but I can't compel you to do anything. I'd make a poor father figure, so I won't even try. I only ask that you listen to me, not that you do what I say. What Sirius has done is done. I just want you to make the best of it, instead of the worst."

Harry struggled for control. "I don't understand why it's so horrible for me to be free. I just – is it wrong for me to want something for myself, for a change?"

Lupin shook his head. "No. It's best when freedom comes in stages, though. Most of us get to try freedom on for size during our school days – we make a decision here, or have a choice there. You haven't been afforded that chance. I imagine that you must feel trapped by fate, Harry."

Harry took a few rapid shaky breaths. "Remus," he whispered, "there's something I have to tell you. I have to tell someone. I don't know if I can bear it –"

Lupin tightened his grip on Harry. "Harry, whatever it is, we'll deal with it. You can tell me anything, of course."

Harry began, "I heard the whole prophecy. I –"

Lupin closed his eyes. "Dumbledore told me that there is more to the prophecy than the Order has been told. I'm going to ask you to listen to me now, Harry. I want you to be very careful with whom you share what you know about the prophecy. Voldemort surely remains interested in the details."

"Then you know...?" Harry asked.

"I don't know the words, but the gist of it isn't hard to guess," Lupin said. "I will do everything I can to help you. I owe it to your father and mother. I wasn't there for you when I was the only one left, Harry; I truly owe this to you."

Harry stiffened; he quickly changed the subject. "Dumbledore said something about Mr. Diggle having to go over the will with me..."

"I'll enquire with Dumbledore," Lupin said. "I do need to be a part of the discussion when Diggle visits."

Harry returned, "I'm glad for that."

Dumbledore brought Diggle blindfolded to the Lion's Den an hour later, to Lupin's surprise. The Headmaster looked as though he wanted to converse with Harry but instead took a deep breath and left.

Lupin sat with Harry for hours while Diggle walked through parchment after parchment describing Harry's inheritance from Sirius. Then, he explained about the Potter Family Trust in excruciating detail – the money, the investments, the rights of inheritance, and restrictions on the use of funds, and on and on. It was like listening to a History of Magic lecture at the bottom of the ocean. At a quarter past one, Lupin opened the front door and cast a silvery spell of some sort. Not more than a minute later, Dumbledore entered. He quietly conferred with Lupin, and then covered Diggle's eyes once again before the two of them left.

"Hi, Professor Dumbledore, and how was your day?" Harry snapped to no one in particular.

Lupin sighed, "He's accustomed to getting his way, Harry, and he's quite unhappy that you've signed off on all of this."

"Are you unhappy?" Harry asked.

"I'm concerned," said Lupin.

"I didn't understand most of what Mr. Diggle was saying, you know," admitted Harry.

"You weren't alone at times, I assure you," Lupin said. "I'll be seeking assistance in a number of areas. Madam Bones may have useful contacts, and this is what Ted Tonks does for a living... Harry, about Madam Bones... I do appreciate what you were trying to do..."

"There aren't many people I can trust," said Harry. "She's tough but she seems fair. It feels right."

"I'll work with her, of course, provided that she'll work with me," Lupin allowed. "It's far too late for me, Harry. We should both try to sleep."

The three bedrooms on the first floor were all simple. Harry had chosen the one with the most light. There was a bed and a small desk with a shelf. His trunk was open and emptied into a bureau and

a small cupboard. Harry sat wearily at the desk. All the papers Diggle had left were neatly stacked on the desk, and the wooden box from Sirius took up most of one shelf.

A squeak came from behind him. "Dobby wishes to know if Harry Potter is ready for bed."

Harry almost fell out of his chair. "Dobby, please don't sneak around like that!"

Dobby nearly jumped into the corridor. "Dobby is so sorry, Harry Potter, sir! Dobby did not mean to cause a fright!"

"I see that all of my papers are here," Harry said idly.

Dobby puffed up. "Dobby knows how to run a household, Harry Potter, sir," he said.

Harry smiled. "I wasn't criticizing, Dobby. I was just surprised. I'm not used to having someone else do things for me."

Dobby looked away. "Dobby can leave well enough alone, if that is what Harry Potter prefers."

Harry shook his head. "No, I mean, it's really nice. Thank you, Dobby."

Dobby beamed, and his eyes filled with tears. Dobby's roller coaster of emotions nearly made Harry sick to his stomach; he wondered if all house-elves were that way. "Dobby is so happy, sir, to be serving the great Harry Potter," the house-elf gushed. "He is too kind and too generous for Dobby to understand!"

Dobby skittered to the bed, and drew down the sheets. He laid out Harry's worn T-shirt and boxers that he used for pyjamas. "Dobby thinks that Harry Potter should buy new clothes," he muttered. Dobby went into the cupboard and fetched a pair of Harry's heavy woollen socks.

Harry laughed, "What are those for? It's the middle of the summer."

Dobby looked at Harry with life-or-death seriousness on his face. “Dobby does not think that Harry Potter should sleep without socks. He can never know when he might need them.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m going to read for a while, Dobby. Good night.”

“Dobby wishes Harry Potter good night and good rest, sir.” The house-elf closed the door behind him.

Harry pulled Sirius’ box off the shelf and set it atop the papers on the writing desk. I think I’d even sit down with ‘Hogwarts: A History’ at this point, Harry thought. He wanted – no, he needed distraction.

He opened each of the envelopes attached to the inside of the lid, and counted the money inside. He was certainly ready to run, thought Harry, and apparently in style. He wondered how Sirius had managed to accumulate nearly a hundred thousand pounds. It wasn’t like he could walk into Gringotts, and his vault must have been sealed, or watched, or something, he figured.

There were two bundled stacks of photographs, a mix of Muggle and wizard. Some looked to be duplicates of pictures in the album that Hagrid had given to Harry. Next to the bundles was a small box in gold wrapping paper with a scarlet bow. Harry set that aside.

Beneath was an envelope hand-addressed to him. On another envelope Sirius had scrawled “Orion’s Belt”. Sirius’ Hogwarts ring sat in a small open box. At the bottom of the box was a thick, leather-bound book. Harry flipped it open and realised that it was a journal. He wasn’t up for a letter, a journal, or anything more from Sirius – not right then. He felt the same way about the mystery trunk on the floor; he just couldn’t bring himself to open it.

He placed everything back in the box except the hand-addressed letter and the gift-wrapped package, and returned the box to its shelf. He was tempted to open the letter, but his eyes closed before he could follow through...

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It seemed to take Sirius an age to fall. His body curved in a graceful arc as he sank backward through the ragged veil hanging from the arch...

And Harry saw the look of mingled fear and surprise on his godfather's wasted, once-handsome face as he fell through the ancient doorway and disappeared behind the veil, which fluttered for a moment as though in a high wind and then fell back into place.

Harry heard Bellatrix Lestrange's triumphant scream, but knew it meant nothing – Sirius had only just fallen through the archway, he would reappear from the other side any second. But Sirius did not reappear.

“SIRIUS!” Harry yelled, “SIRIUS!”

He had reached the floor, his breath coming in searing gasps. Sirius must be just behind the curtain, he, Harry, would pull him back out again....

But as he reached the ground and sprinted toward the dais, someone grabbed him around the chest, holding him back.

“There's nothing you can do, Harry –”

“Get him, save him; he's only just gone through!”

“It's too late, Harry –”

“We can still reach him –”

Harry struggled hard and viciously. “Let me go – let me go through!” he shouted.

“Why would you want to do that?” Sirius said, tightening his hold around Harry's chest. “I'm not lonely, Harry. I've plenty of company.”

Lupin poked at the veil. "Good-bye, Harry," he said mournfully, falling through.

Dumbledore laughed, "Time for the next great adventure, Harry," winked at him, and dove headfirst through the veil.

Ron clutched Hermione's hand. Ron said, "See 'ya soon, mate," and walked into the veil. Hermione cried, "I'm so sorry, Harry," as Ron pulled her through.

Ginny said brightly, "Can't be late! 'Bye, Harry!" Then she was gone along with Luna, Neville, and the rest. The arm around Harry's chest pulled away.

"It's just us now, Harry," Voldemort hissed. "Time to truly live."

* * * * *

July 30. 1996

Harry woke up flailing at the air. The room was blurry, and he found himself crouched on the floor. A soft grey glow came through the windows. He stumbled to the bed, sat down on its edge, and sighed. Yet another variation on his summer-long dream churned in his mind. I want you out of my head, Sirius, he thought.

He felt like he hadn't slept at all and his attempts to shake off the dream failed. It wasn't exactly reassuring to end with Voldemort, whose absence had been the only satisfying part of Harry's nights since leaving Hogwarts.

He's out killing Muggles, but he's not in my head – that's strange. My scar hasn't even hurt, Harry thought, as he drifted off to sleep again...

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Harry stood in a familiar room, dark save for a few flickering candles. Wormtail attended him.

“His anger has faded away,” Harry said in a chilling voice. “How disappointing.”

“Master, forgive me for my failures,” said Wormtail, trembling.

Harry sneered, “Your existence is itself unforgivable; however, you have not failed. You brought me the runes I sought. Your reward is that you may remain at my side.”

“Anything for you, My Lord,” Wormtail whispered and he prostrated himself on the floor.

“It is time to attempt the curse. If it is successful, then I will start the path to my final success – I will rule forever,” Harry declared, very pleased with himself. “Stand before me, my slave.” Wormtail scurried forward in haste.

“He must feel pain. He shall hate me more than he has ever hated, and I shall own his rage,” said Harry. “Now I shall put the runes to good use. Bring my new friend.”

Two cloaked Death Eaters dragged in a bound figure, obscured by shadow.

“Have the preparations been made?” Harry snapped.

“Yes, My Lord,” said one of the Death Eaters.

“Very well; leave me. Wormtail, tell Malfoy to continue his efforts,” Harry ordered. “Remind him of the consequences should he be foolish enough to cross me. I want you to accelerate the plans for Potter – begin with the last. I will glean the most important information myself, but you will bear the lesser details. Do this for me, and I shall reward you in ways beyond your understanding. Fail me, and you shall wish that you were never born. GO!”

Wormtail left, bowing and scraping, and Harry focused on his bound victim.

Harry walked in a circle around the figure writhing on the floor. He waved his wand in complex patterns. "I know exactly what you want," he said. "I can feel it, you weak-minded fool. You want it so badly, don't you?"

He stopped and read aloud from symbols carved on a small stone. "Together, we can have it," he told his victim. "Phasma transtuli!"

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Dobby tugged at Harry's shirt. "Harry Potter, sir, Dobby is waking you up, sir! Harry Potter was screaming so! Dobby and Winky thought there was danger!"

The door flung open. Lupin rushed in, clad in his bedclothes. "Harry, are you all right?"

Harry murmured, "Fine. Where are...?" Dobby handed him his glasses. The sun shone brightly through the windows.

Lupin pressed the back of his hand against Harry's forehead. "You're warm and peaked," he said. "What were you dreaming about? Was he there?"

Harry said weakly, "He fell through the veil, but he didn't... it was strange."

Lupin's voice turned misty. "Oh... I didn't mean Sirius."

Harry struggled for focus. There had been Sirius, and then Voldemort, and then a curse he'd never heard before and couldn't clearly remember. He said in a jumble, "Voldemort was – there were two of them, and – I couldn't see the person and – the orders for Wormtail –"

Lupin's face reddened. "Wormtail was there? Where was he? Tell me!"

"I don't know," Harry told him, "it was dark –"

“I have to know where he is!” Lupin shouted. “Where is he? Tell me where he is!”

“I don’t know!” Harry snapped. “Don’t you think I want to know? I want to kill him, too!”

Lupin shrank back. “I want justice, Harry,” he said firmly. “I want justice. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t ... I’m sorry I shouted at you.”

Dobby stood very still on the end of the bed. He asked fearfully, “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was here?”

“No, Dobby,” Harry said. “It was a dream, that’s all.”

“I need to owl Dumbledore. You’ll tell him everything?” Lupin asked.

“Fine,” Harry said flatly. “I’d like to be alone.”

“Albus cleared Fred and George Weasley to know this location,” Lupin said. “I expect them to make an appearance this morning. I won’t mention you unless they ask, and you’re not required to see them.” He paused for a moment and added with a catch in his voice, “The will’s to be read this evening at ten o’clock. We’ll have to see about some proper clothing for you.” With that he left and closed the door behind him.

Harry moved to the desk and picked up quill and parchment. He jotted a few notes about what he could remember from the dream, in hopes that the information might keep Dumbledore from sifting through his mind later. Dobby brought breakfast and Harry nibbled at it. He slowly looked through the photos from Sirius’s box. They were filled with familiar people who looked so different; Moody was more or less intact, Sirius’s face wasn’t hollow, Lupin’s hair was entirely brown and his face unblemished by scars. These were people who smiled and laughed, people Harry didn’t know.

“Fred and George are good for a laugh, at least,” Harry said aloud. He put aside the photos, slipped on a cleaner shirt and denims, and made his way downstairs. He picked a book off the living room shelf

at random and sat. His choice turned out to be as dry as a desert, but it did keep him from thinking thoughts best left aside. Lupin saw him sitting there; he said nothing, but gave a hint of a smile.

Not long after that, Lupin let Fred and George Weasley through the front door. They exchanged large envelopes and quiet mutters, and Lupin disappeared into the kitchen. George's eyes stopped on Harry as soon as they entered the living room.

"Look what the kneazle dragged in, brother," George said.

Fred grinned. "This must be the house for irritable bachelors, brother."

"Too true, too true; do you suppose that's why His Nibs put us on the list?" smirked George.

"Oh, please do call Dumbledore that in a meeting," Fred snorted. "You're looking fit, Harry. Your uncle must have given you the heavy lifting this summer?"

"You've obviously been fed for once. You're not our ickle Harrykins anymore," George added.

Fred's eyebrows furrowed. "Oi, you do remember our little brother and little sister – don't you, Harry? They'd be the ones running the owls ragged?"

"Er... I'm surprised they didn't come along with you," Harry said.

George shook his head. "This place is on a need-to-know basis only," he said officiously. "We're on grown-up business... hard as that may be to believe."

"Doesn't mean we're grown-ups, of course," Fred said quickly.

"Certainly not!" agreed George.

"' Sides, Ron's a little tired, you know?" Fred said.

“He’s down in the dumps lately... decided to stay in bed this morning,” George added.

Fred sighed, “Ginny says he’s nothing but a great wanker.”

“The Lovegood girl’s staying with the family right now – her dad’s off after something or another,” George said. “She doesn’t think Ron could be a wanker because he doesn’t look like one.”

“We’re not sure how she’d know what a wanker looks like, mind you,” Fred said as he wiggled his eyebrows. Harry nearly choked at that.

“At any rate, our Ronnie has been a bit off,” George said.

Fred explained, “That brain business did something to him. He’s made the rounds, but no one’s certain what happened.”

Harry managed to get in a word at last. “I thought Madam Pomfrey treated him,” he said.

“She treated the scars,” Fred replied. “She didn’t fix his fool head.”

George scowled. “We’re not getting any sleep this summer. We sort of hoped you might talk to him. You have some experience with this sort of thing, after all.”

“You know, the voices-in-the-head, screaming-through-the-night sort of thing?” Fred added.

George sighed. “Problem is, Ron doesn’t want to see you.”

Harry tried to ask “Why?” but couldn’t push the word out of his mouth.

George added, “It might have helped a bit if you’d answered a post or two.”

Fred jumped in, “But Ginny’s right in one – he is being a wanker.”

“He’s just overly sensitive when it comes to you, Harry,” qualified George.

“No,” said Fred, “he’s a jealous prat. He has a problem with your good press, among other things.”

Harry looked at the twins blankly. Fred fished inside his lurid jacket and drew out a folded section of newsprint. “I was using this to toy with Ginny and Luna – well, mostly Ginny. Look below the fold,” he told Harry, handing him the paper.

It was the front page of that morning’s Daily Prophet. There were two pictures beneath a modestly sized headline:

OUT OF THE SHADOWS AT LAST!

The Boy-Who-Lived appears at Diagon Alley

One picture was of Harry sitting with Neville and the little blonde-haired girl at Gringotts. He was talking to the girl. Neville looked anxious. It was taken from an odd angle with Harry in the foreground – the girl’s mother couldn’t have snapped the picture. The caption read, ‘Harry Potter [left], sitting at Gringotts with a friend from Hogwarts and a young fan’.

The other picture was of a vaguely familiar teenaged girl kissing Harry on the cheek. The photographer had managed to catch him after the initial shock had worn off, and had instead captured a trace of a smile on Harry’s face. The caption read, ‘Potter fan Gretchen Hargrove [right] takes a quick smooch’. Harry’s stomach rolled, but he pressed on through the article:

Seldom seen in public, Harry Potter had an opportunity to savour his popularity yesterday. Whilst visiting Gringotts, the Boy-Who-Lived greeted more than one hundred fans and well-wishers. He posed for several photographs and gave a few very rare autographs. “I can’t

believe he asked my name, and he signed my copy of Witch Weekly!” gasped Ethelyn Griswold, of Marsdon.

His younger fans were equally smitten. “He’s brilliant at Quidditch, and absolutely gorgeous, too,” gushed Gretchen Hargrove, of Lower Gatwick, who recently completed her fourth year in Hogwarts’ Hufflepuff House, “and I love what he’s done to his hair!” Hargrove managed to sneak a kiss from Potter, who appeared to enjoy it; and several other young witches managed hugs and autographs.

There were critics on hand as well. “It’s shameful he’s made to live with Muggles,” opined Esmeralda Gobstopp, of Birmingham; “They’ve ruined him with their slovenly dress and lack of decorum.” A few organizations – notably the Daughters of the Goblin Wars – have objected to Potter as a role model, citing his upbringing by Muggles.

Potter was whisked away by Gringotts security goblins after a few minutes. An anonymous Gringotts employee told the Daily Prophet that Potter was visiting the bank in regard to his family trust, which is reputedly amongst the largest in Britain.

“I’m going to stay in this house for the rest of my life,” Harry said in a dazed monotone. He held the paper with his fingertips, arm extended, as if it were a dangerous snake.

Fred snatched it away from him. “It’s not that bad,” he offered, “and we promise not to rub your nose in it.”

George said, “Not today, at least, but that isn’t the point. Think on this this from Ron’s point of view –”

Fred cut in, “Ron’s jealous, delusional point of view?”

George nodded. “Right-o, brother mine. Harry, you get all the attention. Being Harry Potter’s friend from Hogwarts is a step up for Neville. Ron aims a bit higher, you know? The Prophet never mentioned anyone but you by name, not once. It was always ‘Harry Potter and his friends’.”

“Let me, George – I’ve got one,” Fred said, rubbing his hands together excitedly. “You get all the girls.”

Harry started, “That’s ridiculous! No one but Cho Chang has ever –”

Fred slowly shook his head from side to side. “Sorry, Harry, but you may as well have a Sticking Charm on you. It doesn’t matter what you do with your power; it only matters that you have it. This is Ron’s point of view, right?”

“Can’t leave off the money, Fred,” George chimed in. “Ron’s never had two Knuts to rub together. You’re rolling in Galleons, Harry.”

“But I’ve never –” Harry wailed.

George cut him off. “You’ve never lorded your money over Ron, not as far as we’ve seen. It’s just like the girl business, Harry – you have it and he doesn’t. He thinks his life is one giant hand-me-down.”

Harry looked to his shoes. “Is it that bad?”

“It was always there, I suppose,” Fred said, “but everything’s been different since the Ministry. He’s just, I don’t know... dark?”

George nodded. “Dark and cranky and picky. Nothing’s right for that one.”

“The first two weeks back, he was obsessed with making Head Boy,” Fred cringed. “Rules, rules, rules – he made Hermione seem a pushover!”

George whispered conspiratorially, “We were afraid he was becoming...”

The twins shivered and exclaimed in horror, “Percy!”

Harry gave them a gimlet eye. “Why are you telling me all this?” he wondered. “Ron’s your brother. Shouldn’t you stand with him?”

Fred put his arm around Harry's shoulder. "Harry, you're more than just a friend and business partner. You're like the brother we never had."

"Fred, we have four brothers," George pointed out.

"Right, then – you're like the brother we should have had," Fred added. "Percy is a genuine wanker, Charlie's never around, Bill's all about the shagging lately, and Ron's gone 'round the twist."

George stared daggers at Fred. "Harry," he said, "what Fred should be saying is that Ron needs his friends just now. Ron doesn't see it that way –"

"– But we're right and he's wrong," Fred cut in.

"We're asking you to stick it out with him," said George

Fred said with a frown, "We think Ron could get himself in trouble, acting like this. Here's hoping that you can stand him."

Harry asked, "What about Hermione? She's been keeping up, right?"

Fred rolled his eyes. "She's not exactly a prize, is she?"

George scowled at Fred. "Let up on her a bit. She's practically a prisoner in her own house. How would you be, stuck there with Mum for a month?"

"Bleagh," Fred said.

"My point exactly," George continued. "She's been to the Burrow once, and poor Errol's been kept busy. She thought this Head Boy business of his was, what did she say, a 'healthy coping mechanism'? Thank Merlin he's given up on it."

“Hermione’s as far ‘round the twist as Ron,” Fred said. “Tonks says she’s ‘fragile’ right now and that we should shove off. Of course, George hangs on every word that Tonks says –”

George crossed his arms. “I’m wounded, really I am.”

“You can listen to her all day long for all I care,” Fred said, grinning, “as long as she never, ever sets foot in the store or the lab – unless we set out to blow up half of Diagon Alley.”

Harry imagined Tonks dropping or stumbling over some of the twins’ more interesting creations. He was about to ask them about the store when Lupin returned with a small crate. George traded a solemn look with Lupin and took it in hand.

Fred shook Harry’s hand in formal fashion and tried not to laugh. “Always spiffing to see you, partner. Hopefully we’ll talk again tonight.”

“Tonight...?” Harry said blankly.

“ We received letters from Gringotts,” George explained. “The reading starts around ten, right?” Harry’s neck twitched and the twins quickly let it drop.

After Fred and George left, Lupin suggested to Harry that they go to a market. This made little sense to Harry, as Dobby and Winky were taking the kitchen duties. He was surprised to find that they could leave the Lion’s Den by Floo; Lupin explained that the fireplace only allowed for outbound travel.

A few moments later, Harry found himself in the backroom of a bookshop, which led them to an ancient building that Lupin called a priory, and then to an abandoned house in what was surely London. They walked until Harry was able to hail a taxi, which let them out on the edge of several blocks crowded with stands, tables, and throngs of people. It appeared to Harry that a person might buy anything in the world right there on the sidewalks.

Harry was immediately attracted to a rack of waist-length coats made mostly of leather. The vendor proceeded with a meandering tale about their history as aviator jackets during the Second World War. Lupin whispered in Harry's ear that this was an obvious tactic for driving up the price. Harry had never before haggled and he decided that it was rather fun. Lupin told Harry that he did a fair job of it, but warned him to be more cautious about flashing around fifty-pound notes when it was time to pay. The next purchase was a wallet.

He found denims, and shirts, and other necessities – anything and everything to rid himself of Dudley's awful hand-me-downs. He tried on a vividly coloured pair of trainers made for running, and took those as well. One stand extended from a storefront that sold formal clothes. Lupin suggested to Harry that he purchase a suit for the evening. After much prodding, he settled on a dark grey and black three-piece that needed alterations. Lupin whispered to Harry that Winky could surely take care of that. One of the salespeople tried gamely to match ties to the suit but Harry had no interest in them; he settled on two banded-collar dress shirts, one white and one black. Formal shoes were even worse than ties as far as Harry was concerned. He had never worn shoes other than trainers for any length of time, and the stiff leather pinched his toes and chafed his heels. At length, he settled on a pair of black slip-ons that weren't completely irritating.

Lupin and Harry bought food from carts. Harry avoided anything that seemed familiar; according to Lupin, that was what Sirius would have done. He wolfed down something called 'vindaloo' that lingered in his mouth and made his eyes water. Lupin said that eating from the carts was suicidal but went along just the same. There were performers everywhere, it seemed; Lupin called them "buskers". Harry managed to talk two of them into showing him how to juggle, while Lupin looked on in amusement. Harry was able to briefly manage four balls at a time. He wanted to learn how to eat fire after that; Lupin gave a discreet reminder that the buskers were using Muggle fire, which was quite hot. Harry shook his head at Lupin for stating the obvious, but moved on nonetheless.

It was a fine evening, and they walked for a time before hailing a taxi and launching into another circuit of Floo stops followed by another long ride from the seaside to the woods. Winky did indeed know how

to alter clothing, and soon the suit fit Harry as if it were made for him. She also made changes to his school cloak that sharpened it up considerably.

Lupin wanted to leave for the reading no later than a quarter past nine. Harry fussed with his hair at the last moment. It was as thick as ever, though a bit more manageable with the extra length. He tried sweeping it back but that made his scar stand out. He settled on combing the sides back and leaving the top to its own devices.

Harry and Lupin found themselves ejected from a fireplace in the great hall of Gringotts, which was echo-filled and a bit sinister when the bank was otherwise closed. Fliptrask, the goblin who Harry had met the day prior, met them there. They were directed to one of the many doors off the hall. A short corridor took them to a large and ornate room with a dark table at the far end and a few rows of heavy wooden chairs. Harry's mood – the sense of the room itself, in fact – was as dark as the table. He said and heard nothing until a hand gently set down on his shoulder. His wand was in hand before he turned his head.

“Good evening, Harry,” Dumbledore said, “you cut a dashing figure in that suit.”

“Thank you,” Harry said grimly as he returned his wand to his sleeve.

The man with Dumbledore was fully cloaked and Harry felt a surge of dark anger. The man's hood lowered and Harry instantly spat, “What are you doing here?”

Dumbledore said calmly, “Harry, please be civil.”

Severus Snape sneered, “If you confer with the goblins, Potter, you will see that I'm on the list of attendees. Black arranged for me to receive a letter; only Merlin knows why. I have come against my better judgment.”

“I can’t imagine Sirius left you anything other than a good hexing,” seethed Harry. He noticed that two of the three goblins in the room were taking close notice, but couldn’t bring himself to care.

“Undoubtedly,” Snape sneered, “but Professor Dumbledore will surely administer the necessary counter-curses.”

Harry moved toward Snape until they were a few inches apart. “I won’t let you ruin this,” he growled. “I’m of age now, and I won’t hold back any longer.”

“Are you actually threatening me, Potter? Oh, help, please, I’m so frightened. Save me from this whelp of a schoolboy,” Snape mocked.

“Severus –” Dumbledore warned.

“You won’t be treating me or my friends badly anymore, Snape,” Harry said firmly. He was dimly aware that there were several more goblins in the room now. Snape glared at him, but Harry noticed with some satisfaction that he took a small step backward.

“Or what?” taunted the Potions Master. “What recourse exists in your fetid imagination?”

Harry set his jaw. “Or there won’t be enough left of you to boil in your cauldron,” he said through clenched teeth. “I will never forgive you for what you did to me last year – never! Your so-called lessons left me defenceless, and that helped get Sirius killed. You remember that, when you’re ... GET OUT OF MY HEAD!”

Harry quickly focused on the feeling of Voldemort’s Cruciatus Curse. He summoned up the torture that had racked every muscle in his body, the nausea so powerful that spewing up was no longer an option, the longing for an end - any end at all. Snape fell to his knees and his eyes went out of focus; he made a kind of grunting sound.

Harry felt Dumbledore’s hand on his shoulder. “Enough, Harry,” the Headmaster said.

Harry didn't want it to be enough. He pictured Cedric's death and the horror he had felt, the heavy responsibility for a life lost – and then the responsibility for the pain in the lives of everyone close to him. Harry thought about how he'd been robbed of any chance at a real life, as long as Voldemort was alive.

“Harry, you've made your point – stop this now,” Dumbledore said firmly, and his hand squeezed harder.

It wasn't enough. I want you to know, Snape, he thought, I want you to know what it really means to be me. He recalled the prophecy, all of it.

Snape's eyes snapped open. His face was devoid of expression, and his eyes bored into Harry; his head wobbled and his breathing became ragged.

“Harry, you must release him! Now, please!” Dumbledore exclaimed. He gave Harry a rough shaking.

Harry heard what was surely a snarling argument carried out in the goblin tongue. He closed his eyes and tried to think a good thought, and then settled for thinking of nothing at all.

“I - told you - my - methods - would be – effective - Albus,” Snape managed to say between gasping breaths.

Dumbledore snapped, “I expect far better of you, Severus. Your hypothesis might have been demonstrated in the proper time and place and under proper conditions. I believed that Harry had overstated his experiences with you, but I can see that he did not. You do not teach Occlumency by violating your pupil!”

Snape still breathed hard. “As I have told you for five years, the boy has no capacity for theory. The only way he could possibly learn Occlumency was by experiencing intrusions for himself.”

“Did you teach Harry how to strike back?” Dumbledore asked.

“Not intentionally,” Snape scowled. “He is clearly incapable of subtlety as well, although that is no surprise.” His face became expressionless again, as he turned to face Harry. “Why, Potter?” he asked in a low voice.

“I wanted you to know,” Harry hissed. “I wanted you to try carrying it around for a while, and see how it feels, how it burns at your insides. Besides, I know that you can keep it from Voldemort.”

Snape put on a faint version of his cruel smile. “How very calculating – and in the heat of the moment. That was almost worthy of my House.”

Fliptrask strode imperiously into the room. “Mister Snape, do you seek to be expelled from Gringotts or are you merely a fool?” he demanded.

“This is a simple misunderstanding; no harm was intended,” Dumbledore said genially. Harry glared at him.

“Mr. Potter disagrees,” said Fliptrask. “We offer a single warning. There will be no offensive wand work or mind magics performed within this room or in these halls. I was told that Mr. Potter was defending himself. For defence – and that alone – we give allowance.”

Snape said in his silkiest tone, “You would do well to listen to the Supreme Mugwump. The Potter boy has always easily offended.” Harry counted a dozen goblins in the room now, some with swords in hand. For the first time, his History of Magic classes took on substance.

“There are no Mugwumps here, wizard. Gringotts is the territory of the Goblin nation,” Fliptrask spat. “Under the old ways, wand work on our territory without permission was punishable by death. Under the old ways, becoming the thrall of a dark wizard was punishable by death.”

A wizened voice cried out from the door. "You must remember, my young friend, that under the Treaty of 1806 the old ways were suspended. The wizards do not see a Goblin nation now. You will stand down." Fliptrask turned – unwillingly, Harry thought – and bowed.

Dumbledore removed his hat and gave a respectful nod. "Ragnok, I am at your service," he said.

The goblin at the door was clad in fine robes and so many medals and decorations that it looked as if the sheer weight should pitch him over. "I am too old for ritual greetings, Dumbledore," Ragnok said. "This is your second disturbance in my halls in less than two days. Do you miss the impetuosity of youth so much?"

"I believe we are both too old for that," Dumbledore offered.

Ragnok gave a toothy smile. "For this I am glad," he said; "I am already surrounded by enough impetuosity. I can ill afford more. Fliptrask, son of Martok, we will speak of this in my chambers."

"It will be so, Ragnok, but it is we who have been offended," Fliptrask said. Several of the goblins in the room let out a hiss; it was clear that Fliptrask spoke out of turn. He ploughed on, "This wizard is a thrall of That-Which-Should-Not-Be-Named. He attacked –"

Ragnok cut him off. " – and such an attack is an internal matter for the wizards to address. However, the Gringotts Rules of Conduct apply whether these halls are open or closed to the public. A simple conjuring or repair is one thing. The unsanctioned offensive use of wizarding magic within these walls remains punishable, though we use the purse rather than the sword. Explain this to your colleague, Dumbledore. If I must mete out punishment, there shall be no charity."

Ragnok's robe dragged the ground; it looked as though the elderly goblin floated across the floor as he walked slowly toward Harry. "Mr. Potter, we have not been introduced," he said. "I am Ragnok, son of

Baldric the Brutal. Gringotts Wizarding Bank and the Guild of Finance are mine.”

Harry bowed his head, which brought a bemused look to Ragnok’s countenance. “Erm... Harry Potter... son of James and Lily...?” Harry ventured.

Ragnok said gravely, “For most, ‘son of James’ would suffice. For Harry Potter, it is right to recognize a mother’s sacrifice, is it not? Sad tidings bring you to our halls this evening. I hope that this shall not always be so. A contingent of my men will remain just outside during the proceedings – for the sake of security, of course. Now I shall take my leave. It is not right to detain the other beneficiaries any longer. Fliptrask, follow.” Fliptrask came to heel like a scolded puppy.

“Thank you for your time, Ragnok,” said Dumbledore.

The ancient goblin stopped just short of the door and said, “Ah, lest I forget, the door you destroyed yesterday was crafted by a long-dead master artisan of my clan.”

“That is... most unfortunate,” Dumbledore said carefully.

“Fliptrask will forward the invoice for its restoration; expect a lengthy and extremely labor-intensive project,” said Ragnok. “Good evening, Dumbledore.”

Dumbledore returned his hat to his head. “We will speak later of Professor Snape’s actions toward you,” he said to Harry. “This evening is to be about Sirius, and thus it shall be so. Come, Severus.” It was Snape’s turn to come to heel, and the two men retired to the back row of chairs as Harry returned to Lupin’s side.

“Are you all right?” Lupin asked. He reached out and smoothed the collar and lapel of Harry’s jacket, even as Harry tried to pull away. It was a parental gesture and Harry was in no mood for it at all.

Chapter Four

SIRIUS MATTERS

Harry turned and found another commotion. Dobby stood near the doors, hands on hips and foot tapping, locked in a furious exchange with two goblins as Dedalus Diggle looked on. The house-elf wore something made of denim swatches with a shiny trim; it looked rather like a tuxedo, but the bright orange socks and argyle fisherman's cap pushed aside the image.

Dobby turned his attention away from the goblins as Harry approached. "Is this suitable, Harry Potter?" he asked brightly. "Winky tells Dobby that the servants of such an important person as yourself, sir, must make the proper impression."

Harry shook his head. "You're not my... never mind that, why are you here?"

"It is Dobby's job to greet Harry Potter's guests, even if Harry Potter's guests are at Gringotts Bank," the house-elf explained.

"Your elf was not on the approved list," one of the goblins grunted.

"Dobby doesn't belong to me," Harry said; "he's a friend. I want him here, so you can change your list."

"It is a house-elf," the other goblin said. "House-elves are property. Is the elf your property or not?"

"Dobby is a free elf, and he's my friend," Harry insisted. "Er, I could ask Ragnok about changing the list if you like?"

"A free elf?" the first goblin said incredulously, even as the second quickly added, "Ragnok will not be needed – the elf remains."

Dobby grinned and then bowed to Harry. "Dobby will take his station at the entry," he said. "Will Harry Potter receive his guests at the front of the room?"

“Receive my...? Uh, I’ll just stand here, I suppose,” Harry managed.

The doors slowly opened and Dobby began to say, “Welcome to the reading of Sirius Black’s –” The house-elf’s eyes bulged; he crossed his arms and squealed, “Dobby does not care about the list; you may not enter! Dobby will not let you harm Harry Potter!” In the open doorway stood Narcissa Black Malfoy and her son Draco.

Harry felt the rage flood back into him, into every chasm – into every empty space inside. His wand was out in an instant. “YOU!” he exploded, “How dare you show your faces here, you – you – MURDERERS!” The goblins looked around uncertainly, weighing whether to protect Harry or the Malfoys.

Lupin said calmly from behind Harry, “Lower your wand; you heard what Ragnok said just now.”

“Why should I? You KNOW what they did!” Harry shouted, waving his wand wildly.

Lupin pulled Harry back a few steps. “Harry, they were invited here by Sirius,” he said.

Harry’s jaw clenched. “He wouldn’t... what was he thinking?”

“They’re Sirius’s cousins, of course,” Lupin said. “This is your first opportunity to act as an adult. Put it to good use.” He made Harry take a few slow, deep breaths before moving away. Dobby still stood before the Malfoys with his arms sternly crossed; he wouldn’t let them move beyond the doors.

Harry said to Dobby in a forced way, “Would you please take our guests’ cloaks? Perhaps you could arrange for some refreshments?” Dobby hesitated, his mouth drawn into a snarl.

Narcissa Malfoy coolly raised an eyebrow. She showed no trace of having even seen Harry’s outburst. “I will not leave my cloak with this creature,” she said. “Why is it here?”

Harry replied as evenly as he could manage, "Dobby has chosen to work for me, Mrs. Malfoy. Keep your cloak."

Mrs. Malfoy slowly surveyed the room before she returned her eyes to Harry. "Come, Draco," she drawled.

Harry watched and waited for the slightest excuse to hex Draco – the first sign of any threat at all, even a cutting remark. Malfoy didn't react beyond a simple smirk. The Black family tapestry had been hung near the table at the front of the room. Mrs. Malfoy headed there and Draco followed; she peered closely at the entries near the bottom and visibly recoiled. Snape moved quickly to acknowledge them and Harry's rage continued to mount.

Dumbledore watched Harry with clear curiosity. Harry decided to take charge of his relationship with the Headmaster for once; he stalked across the room like a sleek predator.

"We need to talk, and now is as good a time as any," Harry said quietly after he drew close.

Dumbledore slowly nodded. He casually waved his hand and Harry heard a faint buzzing. "It is a simple muffling charm, one too weak for detection by goblins," he explained.

"Snape was the eavesdropper, wasn't he?" Harry blurted out.

Dumbledore pursed his lips for a moment and then said, "I am surprised that you revealed your... information... to him, although you were correct that he can conceal it."

Harry ignored the attempt at diversion. "Well? Was he the eavesdropper or not?" he demanded.

"Severus was still serving Voldemort at the time," Dumbledore said. "It was shortly after that event when he first sought me out."

Harry was suddenly struck by a horrible thought and it burst out of him. "He could have saved my parents! He was inside the Death Eaters – he had to know about Wormtail! That...!" He balled his fists and exploded into a stream of cursing that made his Headmaster faintly blush.

Dumbledore cupped his hand over Harry's and said, "He did not know."

Harry stopped in mid-curse. "Wha –?" was all he managed.

"Severus was hardly within Voldemort's inner circle; he was far too young at the time," Dumbledore explained. "He was not privy to all the Death Eaters' undertakings, and I did not expect otherwise. He shared what intelligence he could glean. He confirmed that Remus was not a Death Eater, but your father was beyond listening by then. I received an owl from Severus almost at the moment that your parents were killed. He chose to accompany Voldemort, hoping to reach your mother first."

"He had to know about Wormtail, then – he had to!" Harry insisted.

Dumbledore's face sank, adding years to his eyes as he spoke. "Pettigrew's treachery was carefully concealed from us all. None of us knew the truth for more than twelve years. As for Professor Snape, he... oh, Harry, Severus chose the wrong door. He went to the bedroom instead of the nursery. By the time he reversed course Voldemort was ahead of him. Professor Snape witnessed the death of your mother. He has never fully recovered from that."

"I don't believe you," Harry spat. "How did he get out of the house, then? It was destroyed, or was that a lie as well?"

"I taught Occlumency to Severus," Dumbledore told him, "and thus he is unable to easily hide anything from me. I probed his mind in the aftermath. I was... I am not proud of my actions toward him, and I shall leave it at that. In order to be cleared, the Ministry ultimately required him to take Veritaserum. I was able to privately question him afterward, and confirmed everything that I could see in his thoughts

and memories. I ask you to believe what I am telling you. I ask you to believe, and to attempt to understand. Professor Snape is not evil, Harry. He is capable of great cruelty and he harbours terrible anger, but he is not evil. He is... broken.”

Dumbledore watched Harry and awaited a response. Harry struggled for calm but couldn't find it. The whole room – all of Gringotts – seemed awash in so much emotion that he thought he might drown in it. He thought hard about what to say and settled on the truth. “I'm not ready to hear this now,” he said.

“I respect your response,” Dumbledore said with a faint smile. “Now then, how have you been sleeping? I understand that you had an unpleasant sight this morning.”

“My notes weren't enough?” Harry sighed.

“They were most thorough,” Dumbledore assured him. “I have but a few questions, for the sake of clarity. Voldemort's curse was performed using a wand?”

“Yes; I... erm, I mean, he was moving it around in different patterns,” Harry said.

“I see... can you recall the incantation?” asked Dumbledore.

“It was –” Harry stopped. The end of the vision suddenly seemed quite fuzzy. “I'm... I'm not certain. I know I heard it; it was clear in my mind.”

“Relax for a moment, and then try once again to recall it,” Dumbledore suggested.

“It was – ouch!” Harry clutched at his temples. “I don't understand... I can't seem to think on it at all!”

“Voldemort must have realized that you were present and attempted to confound you,” offered Dumbledore. “The pain is an illusion, my

boy. Find your relaxed state, and think on the incantation one word at a time.”

“I don’t have a relaxed state,” Harry grumbled. “It was only two sodding – er, that really hurts! – two sodding – oh, bollocks!”

Dumbledore laughed, “I have never heard the word ‘bollocks’ used in an incantation before; this must be something quite special indeed.”

Harry laughed with him and the pain relented – even the wave of emotion receded a little. He heard an echo of the spell in his head and quickly shouted out, “Plasma trans-tulley! Or... uh... something like that, I don’t know. Does that make any sense to you?”

Dumbledore mouthed the words silently and a faint look of recognition came over him. “It is vaguely familiar... quite old, I believe. That may explain the incorporation of runes. It surprises me that Tom would dabble in the old magics when he has shown such disregard for them in the past. Some research is required to be certain. Now, could you offer an explanation as to how Sirius figured into the vision?”

“Sirius wasn’t in the vision,” Harry returned. “Did Lupin mention that to you?” Dumbledore nodded.

“I had a dream before the vision,” admitted Harry. “It wasn’t important. I’ve been having dreams about Sirius since it happened.”

“Do you mean to say ‘nightmares’?” Dumbledore asked.

“I meant ‘dreams’, and they’re not important,” Harry said. “Voldemort hasn’t turned up in any of them until now, and this was the first vision I’ve had since the end of the school year.”

“Excellent, Harry – this is an indication that you have made great progress, perhaps despite your instruction. Still, nightmares will threaten your control,” Dumbledore warned. “They open your mind to influence and penetration. A small amount of Dreamless Sleep potion

may be in order, or perhaps someone with whom you might discuss your dreams?"

"I've had enough taken from me," Harry snapped. "Dreams, nightmares – I don't care. They're as close as I'll ever get to Sirius again, and they're mine."

"These were merely suggestions for –" Dumbledore began.

"I'll handle it," Harry said firmly.

Dumbledore watched Harry for a while. Harry for his part was unwilling to let his eyes waver, even when he began to feel like a participant in an awkward staring contest. Finally, Dumbledore suggested, "Perhaps you should greet the other beneficiaries?"

Mad-Eye Moody was hobbling around the hall, though Harry noticed he never moved more than ten steps clear of the door. "Hello, boy," he growled by way of greeting.

Harry was still fuming. "Why are you here?" he snapped. "Did you get a letter?"

Moody smiled his disturbing smile. "Black and I weren't what you call close," he said. "I'm extra security for the Weasleys and the Granger girl – Dumbledore's request. You can never be too careful."

"Right... constant bloody vigilance," Harry muttered.

With one eye on the door, Dobby walked amongst the small knot of goblins who had not yet left the hall; he offered them something red and bubbling in stone mugs on an iron tray, which they took without acknowledgement. In a flash he was at Harry's side. "Dobby thought it best to keep the goblins well watered. Dobby hopes that Harry Potter is satisfied with Dobby's service," he said.

Harry didn't want to smile but he couldn't help himself. "You're doing a fine job, Dobby, but you're not a servant. You work for me, right?"

“There is no need for the insulting, Harry Potter,” Dobby huffed. “Dobby serves, and Winky serves. This means we are servants – end of discussion, sir.”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not letting up on this, you know?”

“Dobby is needed at the door,” the house-elf said quickly. He ushered in Tonks and her parents, who waved to Harry as they passed. Harry watched Dedalus Diggle wander the hall, oscillating between excitement and nervousness. Diggle ended up in a sharp-looking exchange with Ted Tonks and Harry looked on from the corner of his eye until Professor McGonagall came into the hall. He hadn’t expected to see her but Dobby was trying to attend to everyone all at once and she was moved along before he could speak with her. The door had closed of its own accord and someone began to knock loudly. I’m hardly royalty, Harry thought; I can answer the door myself, for goodness’ sake.

Molly Weasley stopped at the threshold and looked at him blankly for a moment before recognition set in. “Harry, so nice to see you!” she said. “Bill told us you’d changed a bit, but I had no idea...” She gave him a light hug, then stepped back to examine him. “It looks as if you were fed this summer. I suppose it paid to give your uncle a talking-to.” She seemed subdued to Harry, a state he had never before associated with Mrs. Weasley.

Arthur Weasley was right behind his wife. “Hello, Harry,” he said. “We’d like to offer our condolences – should have done it weeks ago.” Harry thought Mr. Weasley looked as if he’d aged five years in five weeks.

Harry stepped to one side and insisted, “Come in, please! I didn’t mean to block your way.”

“Dodgy time of day for a party, isn’t it?” Ron said. He was still taller than Harry, though the gap had closed an inch or two over the past year. Under the bright gaslights of the hall, there were dark circles under Ron’s eyes.

Ginny budged Ron aside. "Hi, Harry," she said with a curious smile. Harry wondered what she was playing at. The twins waited for the others to clear the doorway.

As the other Weasleys moved toward McGonagall, Harry pulled Ron aside. "Nice to see you, mate," he said.

"Glad you're okay, I suppose. An owl or two wouldn't have been too hard on you, eh? Hope you've had a cracking good time," Ron fired back.

"Ron, I –"

Ron's face exploded in a full-out flush. "'Course I know you've been really busy lately – everybody knows that, what with the whole world coming to a halt. So how's it feel being a big man now?"

The last thing Harry wanted was to handle a jealous rant. "Save it for Malfoy," he snapped.

"Malfoy... he's here?" Ron snarled. "He's a relative and all, but I didn't think the slimy git would dare show up. I figured he'd be too busy kissing his daddy's backside."

Harry was confused. "Kissing his... pardon?"

Ron gaped at Harry. "What, you don't know?"

Harry shook his head. "No owls and no Daily Prophet this summer," he said. "I saw Neville at Diagon Alley and he told me about the attacks on Muggles. Come to think of it, I heard about them first from Hermione on the phone but she didn't have a chance to explain..."

Ron's eyes lit up. "You talked to Hermione on the fellytone?" he asked. "How did she sound? Did you talk to her before or after the scare they had?"

"During, actually," Harry said. "I was talking to her and she had to leave in a rush."

Ron said with a shudder, "It had to have been V-Voldemort. Professor Dumbledore was right to post a watch with the Grangers."

"What was it – I mean, what did he send her?" asked Harry.

"A book and a rose!" Ron huffed. "A bloody rose just shows up in mid-air, right next to her. I mean, they've got wards on top of wards – no Floo, no Apparating in or out, nothing. Then the book and the rose, they go all fuzzy and fall apart – bam! – nothing left but dust. Who else would have done that? I'd have been a lot happier if she'd gone somewhere else – maybe the Burrow – but Professor Dumbledore thought they'd be more comfortable there."

Harry began, "I'm sorry –"

"That won't scratch with Hermione," Ron said. "She was going spare, thinking you were dead or something. I heard she made them give her Mrs. Figg's fellytone thingy so she could be sure you were checking in."

Harry changed the subject. "What's this about Malfoy and his dad's backside, then?" he asked

"He got off; not a grand surprise, I suppose," Ron grumbled.

"How could he get off? How? He was there – people saw him!" Harry demanded.

Heads snapped around in their direction, and Ron answered in a low voice, "It isn't hard to figure. People listen to Galleons, right? He claimed the Imperius Curse and Fudge came out in favour of him."

"He claimed the curse again – of course he did," Harry sneered. "Fudge... if anyone's under that curse, it's him."

Dedalus Diggle called out, "Attention! Attention, everyone! Thank you for coming, though I dare say, I didn't expect that so many of you would arrive early. Mr. Black stipulated that the reading of the will

should conclude at midnight, which forced me to guess as to how long the reading would actually take. We may as well begin now, on the change that I've guessed wrongly. Take a seat, if you please!" Ron drifted off to his family and Harry took a seat next to Lupin at the front of the room.

Diggle took off his top hat and ruffled through a violet valise. He took out pince-nez glasses and a thick sheaf of parchment. "Now then," he began, "I am Dedalus Diggle, for those who do not know me, and I was charged to represent Mr. Black's interests in the event of his untimely passing. Let me begin by expressing my deepest sympathy to all of you. Mr. Black was a friend to many of you and a relative to others. I met him more than twenty years ago and I consider it an honor to serve him now –" He stopped and shot a pointed but nervous look at Dumbledore, before continuing, "– despite how some may feel about the decisions he has taken." After some more ruffling of parchment, he added, "Mr. Black made more than one interesting decision, as you will all soon discover."

He adjusted his glasses and looked up and down the top sheet of parchment. "Let me confirm that all concerned have arrived before going further. Harry Potter is here, of course. Andromeda Black Tonks, Theodore Tonks and Nymphadora Tonks are here. Narcissa Black Malfoy and Draco Malfoy are here; I do not see Lucius Malfoy..."

"He will not be attending," Mrs. Malfoy said.

Diggle nodded and went on, "Arthur, Molly, Ronald, Ginevra, Alfred and George Weasley are all here. I do not see your other children here, Molly..."

"Bill couldn't attend and Charlie is in Romania," Mrs. Weasley said. "Arthur and I are representing them."

"And Percival..." Diggle asked.

"That would be a matter for Percy," Mr. Weasley said sharply.

“I see,” Diggle said. “Albus Dumbledore is here, of course.... Hermione Granger?”

“She will be here presently,” Dumbledore said.

Diggle pulled at his collar and Harry thought that the room felt a little too warm. “Minerva McGonagall is here...” Diggle said. “I see Severus Snape... Kingsley Shacklebolt?”

“I’m here, along with the Grangers,” Shacklebolt said from the doorway.

Harry turned quickly. Shacklebolt was standing behind Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Next to him, Hermione pulled back the hood of her dark cloak. Her hair was less bushy than Harry recalled it – more a mass of curls and waves. Dobby discreetly took her cloak. She wore a long-sleeved black dress. Harry hadn’t really paid any mind to what others were wearing; now he noticed that everyone was dressed rather formally. Thank goodness Lupin made me buy a suit, he thought.

Hermione caught Harry’s eye, looking at him with – sadness? Sympathy? She mouthed “I’m so sorry” to him. He motioned to an empty chair between him and Lupin, but she inclined her head toward her parents. The three of them moved into the row of chairs behind the Weasleys. Shacklebolt remained at the back, near Dumbledore.

Diggle pulled out a quill and handed it to Lupin, along with a blank piece of parchment. “Before we begin, I have a document that I am required to distribute. It has been reviewed by Gringotts for safety and authenticity,” he said. “Mr. Lupin, Mr. Black told me that either you or Harry would understand.”

Lupin’s lips twitched. He touched his wand to the parchment and said, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” Tonks snickered and the Weasley twins openly gaped at Lupin. Dense rows of text appeared on the parchment.

Lupin passed the parchment back to Diggle who squinted at the text. “This document is a confidentiality charm,” he said. “In order to

remain here and participate in the reading, you must first sign this. The document limits that which you can discuss with anyone other than those who sign the document and remain present during the reading. Some of them... er... do not strike me as things that would come up in a civil conversation..." Diggle reddened to the sound of mild laughter. "I would say that the terms appear reasonable. I advise you to read thoroughly before signing, however. If you do not wish to sign the parchment, then I must ask you to leave the room before we continue."

He signed the document himself and then passed it back to Lupin, who shook his head as he read and then laughed loudly as he took the quill in hand and signed his name. He passed it back to Tonks, who laughed and cried all at once as she looked it over and signed, before she passed it to her parents.

Andromeda Tonks said, "Sirius, you dog!" in a way that left Harry with more than a few questions. She nudged Mr. Tonks, who leaned in and then snorted. They both signed and passed the parchment and quill to Harry. He noticed that the text swam and shifted as he took the parchment in hand.

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I, Harry James Potter, solemnly swear that I will not divulge to anyone other than those present and signatory to this agreement that Sirius Orion Black thinks Draco Perseus Malfoy is a pathetic, spineless, spoiled git who deserves nothing in life. Knowing this, I nonetheless promise that I will only do lasting harm to Draco Perseus Malfoy by accident or in self-defence.

I further swear that I will not divulge the whereabouts of the eighth passage from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade to anyone other than those who swear their allegiance and their lives to me, unless I have a damn good reason than I know without a doubt Sirius Orion Black would understand.

I solemnly swear that I will listen to Remus John Lupin, even against my better judgment, because he deserves my respect and is more often right than wrong.

I solemnly swear that I will hear what Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore has to say, at least from time to time, though I would be wise to doubt his intentions and it may be necessary for me to tell him to get stuffed.

I solemnly swear to stick by my friends, even if they forsake me from time to time, for true friendship is worth that price.

I solemnly swear that I will find time and opportunity to enjoy my freedom, in the best spirit of Messrs. Moony, Padfoot and Prongs – to hell with Wormtail.

I solemnly swear that I will keep true love at any cost, should I stumble over it, for this is the best way that I can honour my parents.

Finally, I solemnly swear that I will play by Sirius's rules tonight, certainly against the better judgment of all those assembled, and shall refrain from cursing Sirius Orion Black's name until tomorrow.

This I so swear before all authority, both civil and supreme, on this 30th day of July, Anno Domini Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Six.

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Harry didn't know what to think – it was funny, bitter, strange, inviting and dangerous all at once. It occurred to him that perhaps he didn't know Sirius very well at all. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, though he knew that he didn't want to cry in front of a room full of people. He scrawled his name on the parchment, quickly passed it along and then leaned forward in his chair to collect himself.

When he at last sat up, he saw Hermione's eyes upon him. She looked sad and concerned and something else that he couldn't place. There were so many emotions flying about the room that it was bewildering. Harry wanted to talk to her, to ask how she was really faring. Ginny was also watching him with a sort of concern, but it seemed lighter somehow.

“A Knut for your thoughts, Harry,” Lupin said.

Harry was still somewhere else. “Wha...?”

Lupin said in a near-whisper, “You’re the only one to this point who hasn’t laughed.”

“What did yours say?” Harry asked.

Lupin raised an eyebrow. “Do you suppose...?” He turned to face the row behind. “Andromeda, why did you call Sirius a dog?”

She blushed and gripped her husband’s hand. “I don’t think that’s for public consumption,” she said. “Let’s call it a private joke and leave it at that.”

Lupin nodded, smiling. “The text must fully conform to the reader,” he said. “Sirius was terribly creative with parchment enchantments.”

Ron had the parchment just then. His brow beetled in confusion, and then his eyes narrowed and jaw tightened. “I’m not signing this,” he said flatly.

Mr. Weasley took the parchment from Ron. After a moment, he said, “Ron, I’ll let you be of your own mind on this, but I don’t understand the problem.”

Ron’s eyes nearly bugged out. “You don’t see the problem? I can’t sign that! The things he said... how can you not see the problem?”

Hermione put her hand on Ron’s forearm and he pulled away as though stung. “I won’t do this for you,” he spat at Harry. “You have everything anyone could ever want – he had no right!” Both Mr. Weasley and Dumbledore sprang to their feet, but Ron brushed past his family and hurried out of the room.

“Ronald Weasley, come back here at once!” Mrs. Weasley shouted after him.

Mr. Weasley hurriedly signed the parchment and said, "Dedalus, I'm going after him. I trust that I can leave and then return?"

Diggie fanned himself with a stray parchment. "Goodness, I'd not expected something like this! Yes, of course – but do hurry back!"

"What gives?" Fred said, glancing at the parchment. "Merlin! George, get a look at this!" George leaned in and his eyes grew wide. They both stared intently at Lupin and quickly signed.

Mrs. Weasley took the parchment and quill from her sons. "Leave it to Sirius to stir up trouble... oh... oh, my..." She fumbled for a handkerchief. "Oh, dear... but why would this upset Ron so? This can't be what he read..." She dabbed at her eyes and asked Ginny, "Would you take a look at this, dear?"

Ginny took the parchment without acknowledging her mother. She read it through, and then seemed to read it a second time, this time with one eyebrow raised. "I... I don't see anything to make Ron go off..." she said haltingly. Her eyes never left Harry as she handed off the parchment to Hermione.

Hermione froze before her eyes reached the bottom of the sheet. Harry knew terror when he saw it. He was halfway to his feet when Lupin grasped him by the shoulder.

"This is between Hermione and Sirius," Lupin whispered. "You ought not interfere; honestly, I don't know what might happen if you did."

"Hermione? Hermione, say something," her mother said.

Hermione lowered the parchment to her lap and looked directly at Harry. He felt like her eyes were boring through him, but he could read nothing in them – it was almost as if she was watching something well behind him. He began to doubt that he would keep his oath not to curse Sirius's name.

“Let me have a look,” Hermione’s father said, pulling at the parchment. She wouldn’t release it so he leant over to read it. “What’s all this?” he exclaimed. “What are you people playing at?”

“I do apologise, but you’re not addressed in Mr. Black’s will. Miss Granger is the beneficiary. You are here as an allowance to her age.”

Mr. Granger turned crimson. “She won’t be signing anything without our consent, and certainly not this. I suggest that you –”

Without a word and without taking her eyes off Harry, Hermione pulled the parchment free of her father’s grasp, signed it and handed it to Professor McGonagall. “Mr. Diggle, may I be excused for a moment?” she asked in a toneless voice and without awaiting an answer.

“Hermione, wait!” Mrs. Granger said, following her.

“I’m not going anywhere until I have an explanation,” Mr. Granger said sternly. Lupin rose from his seat and made for Mr. Granger. Harry used the opportunity to move quickly for the door.

Ron and Hermione stood a few paces into the corridor, arms crossed and exchanging glares. Mrs. Granger had stopped just beyond the door. She saw Harry and demanded, “Explain this. Tell me anything, for God’s sake! We’ve endured a 24 hour guard for the last month and all Hermione gives us is silence. Dora and the others have explained more than she has, and we’re left with more questions than answers – and now this! Perhaps now that you’re here, she’ll feel that she has permission to speak.”

Hermione’s head whipped around. “I don’t need permission to speak, not from Harry or anyone else,” she sniffed.

“Hermione, we’ve been more than fair with you –” Mrs. Granger started.

Harry felt Mr. Granger behind him before he heard a voice. “Yes, more than fair!” Mr. Granger growled. “I’m a prisoner in my own

house because of these people. We... we should have followed our better judgment and ignored that Hogwarts letter in the first place!"

"Thomas, enough!" Mrs. Granger shouted. "Hermione, did this Mr. Black ask you to do something? Did you just agree to involve yourself in this conflict that's happening?"

"It's not a conflict, Mother; it's a war. You don't agree to participate in a war. It's unavoidable – the entire wizarding world has to take sides," Hermione said.

"This is absurd!" Mr. Granger said. "You're sixteen years old, for God's sake! That's it, we're going through with the move. We're – not a word, young lady, not a word – we're going to sell what remains of the practice and move on. Australia, Canada, America... anywhere but here."

Ron's arms fell and he spluttered, "M-move? What do you mean?" Harry didn't say it – he couldn't seem to force a word out – but he was just as startled.

"I haven't agreed to any such thing," Mrs. Granger said angrily. "I'm going to speak with my daughter now. Go out into the hall and pace, or sulk, or whatever it is you do – I honestly don't care at the moment." Mr. Granger clenched and unclenched his fists, harrumphed, and began to stomp away.

"I... I'm sorry. This is my fault, really," Harry managed to say.

"We agree on something, then. Stay away from my daughter, Mr. Potter," Mr. Granger stormed as he left. Mrs. Granger studied Harry and he squirmed, waiting for her to say something.

Hermione broke the silence. "I need to speak with Harry and Ron," she said.

"I see," Mrs. Granger said.

"Alone."

Hermione's mother kept looking at Harry. "I'm not comfortable with that," she said.

"After that, I'm going back into the room and I'm going to finish this. You can wait with Dad, if you like," Hermione went on.

"No," Mrs. Granger said in a way that brooked no argument.

"You can drag me to Antarctica if you like, and it will change nothing," Hermione said. "I don't know what else I can say to make you understand."

"You could consider confiding in us!" Mrs. Granger pleaded.

"Perhaps I could confide in you, Mother," Hermione said, "but if Dad was there, we'd be on the first plane to anywhere. I need to speak with Harry and Ron – now, please."

"She says the two of you are her best friends. I hope you're ready to act the part," Mrs. Granger said to Ron and Harry before she headed after her husband. As soon as she was gone, Hermione began to quietly sob.

"Hermione –" Ron started.

"Don't," she said between ragged breaths; "not either of you!"

"I wanted to tell you how sorry I am about that telephone call. I was being cruel; I wasn't thinking. I've been doing that quite a lot lately: not thinking," Harry said.

"Cruel? What do you mean, you were cruel?" Ron snapped.

Tears welled along Hermione's eyelashes. "That call doesn't seem so important just now," she said.

“It is to me,” Harry told her. “I was trying to hurt you, I think. I can’t imagine anything more awful. I thought – I thought I couldn’t hurt you. Chalk up another mistake for Harry Potter, intentionally making his best friend feel horrid... wha...?” Hermione enveloped him in a brief but firm hug; waves of her hair flowed across his face. Rage and frustration flowed out of him.

“I think I know what you saw on the parchment, Ron,” she said.

Ron began to flush. “You’re wrong,” he said. “If you signed it, then you have to be wrong.”

“Obviously we all saw something different from one another,” Hermione said. “Sirius must have charmed the parchment. What did you see, Harry?”

“Yeah, I’d like to know that myself,” Ron huffed.

“He had quite a lot to say,” Harry ventured. “I wonder if it’s okay for me to say anything now, or if we have to wait until afterward? I don’t think any of us want to be hexed.”

“Hadn’t thought of that,” Ron admitted.

“It’s a fair point,” Hermione said. “But we have to talk later, then. I have to talk to you about this – please don’t walk away.”

“I promise that much,” said Harry.

“Am I going to be a part of this, then?” asked Ron.

“If I’m right about what you saw, then I’m ashamed of you, Ron Weasley,” Hermione fumed. “I can’t speak to him, Harry. You tell him – you tell him that if he won’t sign, I may never speak to him again!”

“Well, you tell her that if she signed what I read, then I don’t care if she never speaks to me again!” Ron blustered.

“Oh, no, you aren’t putting me in the middle of this!” Harry snapped. “Here we stand, arguing about something we can’t even talk about. Do either of you think that Sirius wanted to set us against each other? Well, do you?” When both Ron and Hermione half-heartedly admitted the point, he went on, “The thing to do is set this aside until afterward, right? We all sign the bloody thing and then we’ll work it out.”

“Language!” Hermione said absently. Ron snorted and Harry started to laugh. “Just because we’re fighting doesn’t mean that we should be coarse... stop that!” she huffed. “It’s not funny!”

“Dunno... er... it’s rather funny, I think,” Ron said.

“And you?” Hermione asked Harry piercingly.

“Erm... it’s a little... amusing? Just a tiny bit,” Harry offered.

“I’m returning to my seat,” Hermione said. “What are you doing, Ronald?”

“I’ll sign the parchment – the bloody parchment,” said Ron.

Hermione growled at him and then said, “When you finish whatever bonding ritual boys use to settle their disagreements, I expect to see both of you in there.” She left them there, head held high.

“Ahh, I missed that walk of hers,” Ron said, “the one that says ‘I’m better than the rest of you’.”

“Look, I didn’t mean to make everyone angry by not answering posts,” Harry offered.

“I suppose you didn’t,” Ron said with a shrug. “I would like to have gotten away from all of this, too – not much choice in that, though.” He rolled back his sleeves to reveal a number of green-tinged welts.

“Merlin! They look worse now than they did in the hospital wing!” exclaimed Harry.

Ron let his sleeves down. "Thanks for that," he said. "There's a bonus, too. The brains showed me... things." He shuddered. "I don't know how you've managed it, having him in your head. They only let me have Dreamless Sleep for the first two weeks. I've been to Madam Pomfrey, three mediwizards and a mediwitch. I'm not spirit possessed, I'm not carrying some sort of evil parasite, and I don't have the Dark Mark – other than that, they don't know a lot." Harry went very quiet.

"Say something," said Ron. "I can't stand this, you know?"

"I figured that maybe we needed something else in common, right? We've got Quidditch and food, sure – " Harry managed a hollow laugh, then went on, "This isn't what I had in mind. I do know what you're going through and I wouldn't wish it on anyone. I just... look, just being around me hurts people. I figured that if I was alone..." His eyes watered and he wiped at them.

Ron pressed his hand awkwardly against the back of Harry's shoulder. "Harry? Don't – stop that, now, you don't need to – it's not your fault, for goodness' sake!"

"Not my fault? If I'd left well enough alone, you and Hermione and everyone else wouldn't have been hurt, and Sirius – oh God, Sirius... I may as well have killed him," Harry said bitterly.

"Aww... did the Weasel say nasty things to ickle Potter?" a silky voice drawled from the doorway. "And to think I thought this little party was going to be a bust!"

Ron snapped, "Sod off, Malfoy!"

"Ha – I know what this is about! The green-eyed witch rears her head, eh? Jealousy's unbecoming, Potter, although I'd expect it from the Weasel and his sort." Malfoy looked gleeful. "This will make for all manner of fun. The Quidditch Jester and the Boy-Who-Shouldn't-Have-Lived squabbling over the whiny bookworm – "

“Don’t insult her,” Harry snarled.

Ron was right behind him, and added, “I’d watch myself if I were you, Malfoy.”

“Touching, isn’t it?” sneered Malfoy. “Of course that’s exactly what you want to be doing, isn’t it, Potter?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ron growled.

“Don’t make me angry, Malfoy,” Harry said darkly. “It’s not a good idea.”

“So it’s true, Potter?” Draco purred as a smile spread across his face. “A little owl told me that you’re having control problems.”

“All the more reason to sod off,” Harry said as calmly as he could manage. He gritted his teeth and added, “I don’t want to hurt you,” even as he screamed the opposite inside his head. A warm draft began to blow through the corridor, adding to Harry’s tension. He wiped sweat off his brow with one hand.

Malfoy wouldn’t leave it alone. “Best you get a handle on it, then, before you and your Mudblood princess decide to, you know...?” he said, and then made an obscene and very obvious gesture with his hands.

Harry felt as if he was about to explode. “WHAT DID YOU CALL HER?” he screamed; his voice sounded like it came from a supercharged Sonorus spell. Harry kept screaming at Malfoy, spewing out five years’ worth of hatred. Malfoy spewed a string of profanity back at him, with his hands clapped over his ears and through a grimace of pain. There were angry voices in the background, voices that Harry could barely make out.

“Stop it, mate – take a step back!”

“What’s happened here? Harry, calm yourself. Mr. Malfoy, why must you always antagonize?”

“Harry, don’t! I don’t know why he needs to use that awful name, but he’s not worth this.”

“Why is it so difficult for you all to understand the meaning of ‘no wizarding magic’?”

Harry’s head throbbed and he felt like he was moving in thick syrup. He was surely on fire, the room was so hot. A hand touched him and he heard the last clearly: “Harry, don’t. Please!”

“NEVER CALL HER THAT AGAIN!” Harry shouted. Draco clutched at his head, his eyes squeezed shut; something reddish seeped between his fingers. Harry took deep burning breaths. It was hard to find a calm place, but somehow the hand touching him made it easier. Then there was agony...

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“Don’t stop now, Harry Potter!” Harry shrieked. “I want your rage – it’s so delicious!” He swept around the candle-lit room, looking for Wormtail, but then realized that the rat had already gone to make preparations. His balance was improving as he recovered from the phasma transtuli ritual, and the pacing seemed to help.

“Hello, boy,” Harry said; It’s so nice of you to come visiting. Let me leave you something more to remember me by.”

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Harry couldn’t see or hear anything, and for an instant he didn’t know where he was. He took a step and fell to the floor.

The hand stroked his hair. A voice echoed in his ears, through deep water. “Harry! Harry, can you hear me? Are you all right? Someone fetch a towel!”

He wanted to shout, but the shout emptied out into the same deep water. He heard his own voice in the distance, hoarse and ragged. "Someone help me! I can't get out!"

He struggled to swim, but it was so hard. He wondered what Hermione would think if he drowned. She'd probably go running off with Ron, he fumed. His feet pushed off the sandy bottom, and he dashed for the surface as hard and fast as he could...

"Potter! Time to wake up, boy! I don't care if he's unconscious; smear the chocolate in his mouth if you have to. You'd think none of you had ever been in combat. Stop coddling him, Granger. And you – if you're going to cry, go in the other room. Potter! Snap out of it, damn you!"

Harry's eyes flickered, letting in searing white light. "Am I dead?" He blinked rapidly, his eyes watering.

"Do I look like a ghost?" Mad-Eye Moody was glowering over him.

"Urgh... uh – demon, maybe?" Harry managed, his voice strained and weak.

"He's awake," Moody announced. A crowd of people seemed to materialize around Harry, and the corridor began to swim. He rolled to one side and violently spewed up.

"Whoops – back up, everyone. Give 'im some room," Moody said. Harry saw a flash of movement in the corner of his eye, as he rolled to his back again. Harry sat up, very slowly. Everyone seemed to be clustered around him, excepting Snape and the Malfoys.

"Harry, I was so worried. You scared me half to death," Hermione said. She knelt next to him, a tea towel spotted with blood in one hand, and chocolate held out to him with the other. "Did you see – ?"

Harry nodded and took the chocolate. He tore off a bit, and let it linger in his mouth until he decided that swallowing wouldn't make him spew up again. "It was like the time in the spring. I was him."

Dumbledore bent down, his head next to Hermione's. "This may not be the proper time or place, Harry."

Harry reached out and grasped Hermione's hand. "You saved me," he said.

"I – I don't understand."

"You saved me," Harry repeated. "I was lost and you saved me."

Hermione looked away. "I'm glad I signed the parchment," she said.

Harry didn't know what to say. He didn't like feeling nervous around her. It didn't help that her father was fifteen feet away, trying unsuccessfully to burn Harry to a crisp with his eyes. Harry just wanted everything to feel like his first and second years at Hogwarts again, before all the secrets, when he could tell Hermione and Ron anything in the world. I have to talk to Dumbledore, he thought, like it or not.

"Hermione," Harry said, "Dumbledore and I need to talk, and I don't know if I can stand. Could you...?"

Hermione stood up and said in a firm, loud voice that rivalled McGonagall, "Harry would like us all to get on with the reading. That is why we're here, after all. He'll be joining us presently, so why don't we all return to the room?" It was clear that she was not making a request. Harry gave her a wave of thanks.

Dumbledore asked gently, "May I help you up?"

Harry waved him off, but Dumbledore conjured a small mauve sofa and carefully manoeuvred Harry onto it before conjuring an armchair for himself.

Dumbledore looked at Harry intently. "Did you see Voldemort again, Harry?" he asked.

Harry nodded. "He was in the same place as before, I think. It's difficult to know for certain, since there's so little light. He was angry; he said he wanted my rage. He said..." Harry choked on the words.

Dumbledore asked, "What? What did he say?"

The words tumbled out. "He said that it was delicious."

"I see." Dumbledore looked troubled. "What else, Harry?"

"He knew I was there... said he'd give me something to remember him by," Harry told him.

Dumbledore pulled a light blue handkerchief from his robes, giving it to Harry. "You might want to hold that to your forehead. Kingsley and Moody were able alternatives to a mediwizard, but Voldemort does not leave ordinary wounds."

"What, is my scar bleeding?" Harry asked.

"No, Harry," Dumbledore said. "He apparently tried to mark the other side of your forehead. It should not form a scar, although I will ask Madam Pomfrey for an appropriate unction just to be sure."

"Why –"

Dumbledore brought Harry's hand and the handkerchief up to his forehead. "Try not to think about it anymore, at least not tonight. Would you like more chocolate?"

"No."

"Lemon drop?"

Harry snapped impatiently, "I thought that you were finished mothering me."

Dumbledore looked at Harry sadly. "Is that what you took away from our last conversation in my office? If it is, then I am sorry. Why is it that we can not seem to get through to each other, you and me?"

Harry felt the same combination of anger and embarrassment that filled him at Gringotts. "Let's just finish this, all right? Why did he cut me?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I imagine that he wounded you in order to discourage you from entering his mind. I do not believe that Voldemort intended to let you in, now or this morning. You may be overwhelming his efforts at Occlumency. I can think of nothing to be gained by revealing his plans or telling you that he desires your rage. Why would he give you an opportunity to thwart his plans or to control yourself?"

"He didn't know I was there until the end," said Harry. "He wasn't deceiving me."

Dumbledore looked at Harry with obvious interest. "What makes you say that, Harry?"

"I – I don't know. It's just something I could feel. He wasn't lying. He wasn't telling the truth, either. It was all just, I don't know. . ."

"Factual?" asked Dumbledore.

"Uh-huh. He was just stating facts, or believed that he was."

"Interesting. Your Legilimency skills are also developing. These are good signs, Harry. Very good signs." Dumbledore smiled at him.

"There's something else. I –"

Dumbledore shook his head. "You have had enough for tonight, Harry, especially if you truly wish to attend the reading. Perhaps tomorrow –"

"This shouldn't wait," Harry insisted. "He didn't sound the same."

Dumbledore said, "Explain this to me."

"Even though – you know – he's me, I sound like him," Harry tried explaining. "I hear his voice speaking, not mine. It sounds a little different than in person. I've wondered before if I hear his voice the way it sounds to him. Anyway, I – erm, I mean he sounded different tonight. The voice was deeper."

"Curious," Dumbledore said. "I will need to think on this. Thank you, Harry." Dumbledore extended a hand to Harry, who only accepted it because he couldn't stand on his own. The Headmaster continued to support him until he reached the door. Harry found his footing and then strode into the room unaided to face whatever Sirius had wrought.

Chapter Five

SIRIUS MEDDLING

Inside the room, most of the beneficiaries were looking at parchment envelopes emblazoned with their names as written in Sirius' loopy handwriting. Diggle stood next to Narcissa Malfoy, wildly gesturing and whispering. Hermione was having something of a row with Ron, who had apparently signed the parchment. Harry stumbled once, waved off Dumbledore, and lurched to his seat. Hermione started to come to him but Ron seized her by the hand. She sat back down – Harry thought reluctantly, but he wasn't certain – and Ron kept hold of her hand. Mrs. Granger had returned to the room, and seemed torn between staring at Ron's handholding and glaring at Harry. Ginny gave Ron a strange look, and she moved to sit in the empty seat next to Harry.

Dumbledore said, "Excuse me," and everyone in the room stopped what they were doing. "I will see what is keeping Professor Snape and Mr. Malfoy. Dedalus, I believe that you should move along. We will join you shortly."

Lupin asked, "Are you sure you should be here, Harry? That was quite an ordeal." Tonks leaned forward in her seat and patted Harry on the shoulder.

Harry said quietly, "I'll get through it." He felt reasonably sure that was true.

Diggle twittered at Harry, "So glad to see you're up and around – gave us a bit of a fright, young man! I can scarcely take all this excitement! I don't suppose that was Sirius' intention, but then again, who can be sure?" He retrieved the violet valise from the table, and rooted around inside of it for something. "I believe everyone has their envelopes. Mr. Black left each of you a letter, some of them rather lengthy. Harry, your letter was in the box that you received. As for the actual will..."

He pulled a stone bowl from the valise, and then a smaller silver cylinder with intricate engraving. Diggle placed the cylinder on one

end inside the bowl. He raised his wand, muttered under his breath, and pressed the tip of the wand hard against the exposed end of the cylinder. The cylinder split in the centre and disgorged shining silver threads that filled the bowl.

Lupin whispered to Harry, "It's a Solicitor's Pensieve – very little capacity, but it holds the thoughts much more securely... still quite rare, though."

Diggie tapped several times in a pattern, muttered another incantation, and grazed the tip of his wand through the silver threads. A wave of silver rose from the bowl, spread out, and slowly resolved into a glittering Sirius Black seated on the edge of the table. Ginny tightly squeezed Harry's hand; she was as startled as he was, he figured.

"Welcome, everyone," he said. "For those who haven't seen me in many years, I'm Sirius Black and I'm dead. Isn't that a kettle of fish? I imagine I'm not terribly happy about it, you know – the whole death thing. Then again, being trapped in Grimmauld Place has been a bit like death. Thank you so much, Albus, for arranging my second captivity. What else should I say...? If you're seeing this, it must be summertime. I'm planning to update around the time that Harry returns from Hogwarts. Sixteen is an important milestone, Harry, and I have arranged quite a surprise for you! Of course, since you're watching me from Diggie's pensieve, I missed it. Sorry, Harry, I've always been the last one to the dance and the last one home."

The silvery Sirius stood up. He wore a simple cloak, plain shirt and trousers, and boots that looked a lot like Bill Weasley's dragon-hide pair. He thrust his hands into his pockets and shuffled while he talked. "I'll have a bit to say to all of you before I'm finished. But first, my ground rules – I have the gold... for now... so I make the rules. If you're seeing this, then you've already signed a little bond just between us. It's some of my best work, if I do say so myself. If you don't play by the rules, or if you curse my name tonight, then there will be consequences... nothing fatal or long lasting, but certainly worthy of my reputation. Moony, my old friend, here's hoping someone cheats or curses me – you'll be proud, I just know it." Fred and George gazed at Lupin worshipfully.

Harry noticed that Dumbledore had re-entered the room along with Malfoy and Snape. Clearing his throat, silver Sirius said, "Now that you're all about to be related by money, it's important that you get to know one another. One big happy family, that's what I want. The Black family could never get it right, so I'm going to help you along. Remember: my gold, my rules... and you did agree to follow the rules. Ah-ah-ah, no cursing – most of you won't care for the result."

He sat back on the edge of the table again, and rubbed his hands together vigorously. "Now then, here's your first task. I want you to find the person in the room who you find the most intriguing – no spouses allowed! Be true to yourself, or you might find you're speaking with a voice that's not your own. Remember – the most intriguing. I want you to ask that person one question. That person must answer the question truthfully. If they don't then I've a really great trick up my sleeve, out of a Muggle children's book that Lily once mentioned – the image stuck with me for some reason. Some of you may have to answer several questions, so I'll allot ten minutes for this task. Don't just sit there like great lumps – get up!" The silver Sirius glanced at a ghostly pocket watch and then crossed his arms.

Lupin laughed, "This is too much, Sirius! Right then, Harry, I've come up with a question for you."

Harry smiled. "What, me?" he asked.

Lupin said, "You have to admit, Harry, that a great many people find you intriguing."

Harry blushed. "Well... you don't sound like a troll, so I suppose you mean it. Ask your question, then."

Lupin's expression suddenly became very sober. "How many times have you slept through the night since Sirius died?"

Harry hesitated before he answered, "All but three nights, including last night. I've had dreams, but they haven't woken me for the most part." He waited for a moment, and then added, "No extra head for me - I must have counted right."

Ron spoke to Dumbledore, and Malfoy and Mr. Weasley waited behind him. Andromeda Tonks tapped Lupin on the shoulder, and Fred and George queued behind her. McGonagall chatted with Mrs. Weasley, to Harry's surprise. Hermione stood next to Snape. Must be a coincidence – she's looking for someone else, he thought. She definitely asked him a question, though, and Snape appeared to mull over an answer. Harry wondered if Ron had noticed.

“Hello, Harry –”

“Hello, Mr. Tonks,” Harry shook Ted's hand.

“I must admit that I've been caught up by your story,” Mr. Tonks said.

Harry had the feeling that he was going to be blushing quite a lot. “I hope you've been hearing it from your daughter, and not the Daily Prophet.”

Ted laughed. “I'm familiar with the fickle press, thank you. My daughter has quite a lot to say about you. She was very distressed by the treatment you've received from your relatives. I work with Muggles quite a lot, you know? Most are good sorts; it's just like us – a few bad apples. Enough of that, however – we should get to Sirius' little game. What I'm curious about is how you handle it all... all the attention, the public opinion, the danger?”

Harry really didn't want to answer. “Is that your question, then?” he asked, stalling.

Someone in the corner shrieked then started laughing hysterically, and others began to join in. Hermione said, “Oh my goodness! It must have been Pinocchio!”

Dumbledore's nose stretched out a full six inches from the rest of his face; he shook with laughter. “My apologies, everyone,” he said between chortles. “I just had to find out what Sirius had in store for us. Mr. Malfoy, what was your question again? Let us hope that a correct answer will return my nose to something less pronounced!”

Harry turned back to Ted and said, "I don't handle it well, I suppose. I hate the attention mostly, and it's not fun to be targeted in the press. The danger... I probably handle that the best."

Ted nodded. "Interesting. You didn't really want to answer, did you?"

Harry forced a smile. "I think you've used your question. Will you excuse me?" He crossed the room to stand before the person who intrigued him the most.

"Good evening, Mrs. Malfoy," Harry said.

"Mr. Potter," she said coolly.

He said, "I believe I have a question for you."

Narcissa Malfoy hesitated. "I'm sorry, I must have misheard. You wish to ask me a question?"

Harry steadied himself. "That is how the game is played."

"Fine," she snipped. "Ask."

"Why did you betray Sirius to Voldemort?" he asked. He realised that he'd asked at full voice when some other conversations stopped.

Malfoy snarled, "Why are you speaking to my mother, Potter?"

Mrs. Malfoy stared her son down. "This is none of your concern, Draco. Return to what you were doing." The rest of the people in the room also seemed to accept that as a command, although Harry thought that Dumbledore might still be watching.

She looked at Harry with venom at first, then something else. He knew she was calculating an answer – he could feel it. At length, she said very quietly, "I didn't betray him. Are you satisfied?"

Harry was determined to look her in the eyes. "I'm sorry. I was told that you did."

"You should apologise for asking such an impertinent question!" she whispered angrily.

Harry kept looking at her. "I'm not sorry for asking. I'm sorry I was led to ask." Her mouth opened as though she was going to retort, but simply stayed open. Harry turned to walk away.

"Wait," Mrs. Malfoy said quietly. "I haven't asked my question."

Harry turned back. "Pardon?"

"I haven't yet asked my question," she said hesitantly.

Harry couldn't imagine why she found him intriguing, or what she would possibly ask him. "Ask away," he said, waiting for the other shoe to drop – for Death Eaters to burst in or something along that line.

Mrs. Malfoy had slowly manoeuvred around Harry until he was near a wall and her back was to the rest of the room. She spoke so quietly that she was almost mouthing the words. "If my son was in peril and you were the one who could save him, would you do it?"

Now Harry found himself making a calculation. He responded slowly and hoped to dodge hidden dangers. "I need you to explain yourself," he whispered. "Are you asking if I would be willing to save Draco, or are you asking if I would be willing to put myself at risk to do it?"

She let out a breath very slowly. "He's a difficult boy to like, I know that about him – so judgmental, so cutting with his criticism... so like his father. He does most of it without even thinking." Her voice remained very low. "I'm asking you whether you would save him."

Harry hesitated again, before replying, "I don't know. I won't hurt him – not willingly. If he were hanging from a cliff, I'd pull him up. There are other circumstances where... I don't know... I don't know if I

could trust him enough to save him. I'm not certain that he would want saving if I were involved. Are you satisfied?"

"I'm sorry," she said, and walked away.

There was a quick tap on his shoulder. "Wotcher, Harry."

"Hey, Tonks."

"Why do you shut everyone out?" she blurted.

Harry was startled. "Wha... wait a minute! Are you just curious, or is that your question?"

"It's my question," she said, twirling her hair into ringlets around her finger. "You've got walls higher than Azkaban. Why?"

"Uh..."

"Come on, then, unless you want a foot-long nose," she teased.

Harry realised she wasn't going to give him the space to couch his answer. "To keep other people safe," he answered.

"From what?" Tonks asked.

"Sorry, no follow ups," Harry said, heading for his seat. He didn't make it there. Hermione's mother stood in his path.

"Hello, Mrs. Granger," he said, shifting nervously from one foot to the other.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," she replied sternly.

"Is this going to hurt?" he asked, hoping she would laugh.

She didn't laugh, but she did smile a little. "I hope not," she said, "but let's find out, shall we?"

“Right, then... ask away,” Harry said, closing his eyes.

“What are your intentions toward our daughter?” she demanded.

He stood very still, and turned the question in his mind like he was handling a cursed artefact. “I don’t understand,” he finally said. “What do you mean by ‘intentions’?”

“I mean exactly what I asked,” she said firmly. “I don’t intend to make the question easier to answer.”

Harry let out a trace of a smile. “I think I see where Hermione gets it. My intentions... well, she’s been my best friend for five years. I care about Hermione very much, ma’am. I suppose my main intention is for her to be safe... I would give my life to save hers.”

Mrs. Granger’s eyebrows rose.

“Did I answer your question?” Harry asked.

“Yes... but it’s not the answer I expected. I believe you’re being truthful but incomplete,” she said.

“All right, now I know where Hermione gets it,” Harry laughed.

“Well?” Mrs. Granger crossed her arms.

“I’m sorry?” Harry said.

“Are you being incomplete?” she asked, tapping her foot. He concluded that Mrs. Granger was rather like Hermione fused together with Mrs. Weasley.

“I don’t have any other intentions,” Harry said carefully.

Mrs. Granger’s eyes narrowed. “You’re dissembling,” she accused.

Ginny tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me, Harry." She told Mrs. Granger, "I'm sorry but I need to get in my turn." Mrs. Granger unhappily let Harry go.

Harry said to Ginny, "All right, I'm ready," and flopped down in his chair.

She sat next to him and then whispered in his ear, "You're intriguing, but not that intriguing. I just thought you needed saving."

The silver Sirius twirled his pocket watch on its chain. "Well then, that's ten minutes. Wasn't that ripping good fun? Assuming the room is still intact and you haven't all hexed each other from here to Hogsmeade, let's press on to the second task. This time, I want you to find the person in the room for whom you care the most – once again, no spouses! I want you to tell that person why you care for them, and why they should care for you. Remember... tell the truth! I've concocted something unique for any liars; don't press me on this. This will be difficult for some of you, but you get the same ten minutes. Go forth! Mingle!" He began to lazily twirl his pocket watch again, and looked positively smug. Ginny slid away from Harry and quickly dashed across the room.

Harry slumped in his chair. What in the hell are you trying to do to me, Sirius? he wondered. He didn't want to watch Ron, but couldn't help himself. Straight for Hermione, Harry thought, I knew it. Why doesn't he let go of her hand? Mrs. Granger watched Ron with great interest. Harry forced himself to look elsewhere. Mrs. Malfoy made a beeline for Snape, and it seemed that Snape had chosen her as well. Malfoy sat stiffly in his chair with a careful eye on his mother. Mrs. Weasley appeared to be waiting for Ron. Mr. Weasley talked to Dumbledore; Harry figured he had assumed his wife and children were all out-of-bounds. Ted and Andromeda Tonks quickly spoke with their daughter, who then headed for Lupin. George flitted around them, and Fred looked rather lost.

As soon as Mrs. Weasley occupied Ron, Dumbledore suddenly struck up a conversation with Mrs. Granger. Harry saw an opportunity, and zigzagged his way across the room to Hermione.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello, yourself. Do you, erm, have something to tell me?” she asked, her hands fidgeting.

“You’re the one, of course,” Harry blurted out.

“ ‘Of course’? What does that mean?” she asked briskly.

“I – I – didn’t mean – that is to say, I wasn’t trying to imply – uh, surely you –” He knew he was beet-red, and there was nothing whatsoever he could do about it.

She grinned at him. “I was teasing you – relax!”

“Oh,” Harry said, having absolutely no idea what to say next.

“Come on, then,” she told him, “spill it. You know – why you care about me, why I should care about you, that business?”

Harry looked around the room. Ron had malice in his eyes, but no one else seemed to be taking any notice of he and Hermione talking. “I’m not sure that I should say. I think Ron’s going to murder me in my sleep, first chance he gets.”

Hermione sighed. “He’s being so, I don’t know...”

“Smothering?” Harry offered.

She laughed. “I was leaning toward ‘protective’, but you’re warm.”

“Yes, I am,” Harry said. He wiped his brow.

She laughed again. “The sooner you say it, the sooner you’ll be finished.”

“Such a flair for the obvious!” he mocked.

“You’re evading me,” Hermione said. “Why do you care, Harry?”

“Because you’re so easy to care for –” As soon as it came out of his mouth, he felt his hair grow warm and start to move. Hermione’s jaw dropped and she stifled a laugh. He was painfully aware that Mrs. Granger had taken notice.

“S-s-s-shouldn’t fool around with Sirius Black”, a reedy voice hissed, and Harry immediately realised what had happened.

“Because you’re the smartest witch I know,” Harry said quickly. At least it isn’t getting any worse, he thought.

“A little more honest with yourself, I see,” Hermione said, “a little better. I have to hand it to Sirius; this must be more dramatic than Veritaserum.”

Harry’s breathing was uneven. He was sure his voice was quivering, and he hoped that it didn’t crack. “Okay, because you’re brave?” There was less movement now. “Because you’re a good person?” He struggled for something else ambiguous. “Because you’re loyal.” No change. “Because you’re a wonderful friend – the very best friend I could ever hope for.” He ran his hands carefully through his hair, and it felt normal.

Hermione smiled at him. “That’s wonderful, Harry,” she said, and gave him a chaste hug. Thank Merlin I didn’t have to come up with anything else, he thought. She released him, and said firmly, “Now the rest.”

“Wha...”

“The rest, Harry. You know, why I should care about you.”

He didn’t hesitate for a moment. “That’s easy. Because I would do anything for you – help you in any way that I can, protect you from anything. I would give my life for you.”

He didn't expect the response he received, not at all. Her jaw tightened. "No," she said.

"What? I don't —"

"No, Harry," she said. "No. Let's finish Sirius' stupid game, Harry. Let me tell you why I care for you." She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I am so tired of crying. It seems like it's all I've done this summer."

Hermione sniffed, and wiped her eyes again. "Harry, I care for you because you put the needs of everyone around you ahead of your own, even when it's foolish to do so. Even when people don't deserve it... when they don't deserve you. Everyone else comes first, don't they? That's why I care for you. That's why I worry about you. Why should you care for me? You shouldn't!" Her hair was replaced by thin, writhing snakes worthy of Medusa, and her face went from pink to red. "Er — I mean, because I want you to be happy?" The snakes stilled. "Because that's what best friends do?" She flicked her fingers across her hair, and a few stray snakes still snapped at her.

Hermione fidgeted with her dress, and shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. Finally, she said, "Because I need you... to care for me! Because I need you to care for me." She shook her head, and her hair instantly returned to normal.

Mrs. Granger quickly walked up behind Hermione. "Good Lord, Hermione," she said, "that was frightening! You look as if you could use some air. Excuse us, would you?" Harry looked to Ron, who made no effort to hide his feelings. If Ron were a wand, Harry thought, I'd be dead.

"Hello, Harry. How are you faring with Sirius' little diversions?" Dumbledore's eyes had their familiar twinkle back.

"Of my two best friends, I can't seem to manage talking to one and the other wants to kill me," Harry said dejectedly.

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "I noticed that you and Miss Granger were talking quite a while. I gather Mr. Weasley is being difficult?"

"She was the one he cared most about," Harry said.

"And she apparently cares the most for you," said Dumbledore. "That is rather inconvenient for Mr. Weasley, is it not? It looks as if you may have to face some uncomfortable choices. By the way, Harry, in case you were wondering, I care for you because in the ways that truly matter, you are the strongest person I have ever known. You should care for me because no matter what you may believe, I have your best interests at heart." Dumbledore smiled, patted Harry on the shoulder, and promptly struck up a conversation with McGonagall.

Harry walked back to his seat. As he passed Ron, Ron said, "I don't know what you've said to her, but you'd better not hurt her. I mean it – you'd better not!"

Harry said, "I would die first," without stopping or looking at Ron. Lupin had only just finished talking to Tonks, who was quickly conversing with George. That took a long time, Harry thought, I wonder what that's about.

Ginny sat down beside him again. "I don't know what to do," she squeaked.

Harry grinned. "You sound like a house-elf – what happened?" he asked.

"I talked to Dad instead," she said glumly. Her screechy voice made the hairs on the back of Harry's neck raise. He scanned the room, trying to figure out whom Draco Malfoy had sought out.

She continued meekly, "I heard – I mean, I saw you and Hermione. Okay, I heard a little as well. I don't want to be hexed twice."

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, “I must be a little slow. Where are you going with this?”

“Harry, help me out here!” Ginny pleaded.

Harry suddenly understood, and felt himself blushing yet again. “I care about you, too – honestly,” he insisted. “I promise I won’t make fun. Are you shaking?”

“I want to curse him so badly,” she managed, clearly on the edge of tears. Her voice had returned to normal.

“Just tell the truth, and everything will be fine,” Harry encouraged her. He borrowed Hermione’s turn of phrase. “The sooner you say it, the sooner you’ll be finished.”

Ginny nodded, squeezed her eyes shut, and blurted out in one high-speed burst, “The truth is that I care about you because you’re the bravest person I’ve ever known, and you’ve made my stomach do loops since I first met you, and I don’t have the faintest idea why you should care about me because I have a pointy nose and big ears and a flat chest and I’m completely unimportant, and I can’t believe I just told you that, I’ve never been so embarrassed in my entire life, so I’m just going to crawl in a dark corner and die now – I hate you, Sirius! I hate you!”

The words NO CURSING! erupted on Ginny’s forehead and her face turned sickly green. She dashed to an empty seat behind her parents, and buried her head. Harry sat stunned as Dumbledore quickly moved to attend to Ginny. Mrs. Weasley glared at him without mercy, and Harry briefly contemplated the relative virtues of Privet Drive.

Mrs. Granger and Hermione came back into the room. Neither of them looked pleased, Harry thought. Mrs. Granger returned to her seat but Hermione stopped at the back of the room. Mrs. Weasley looked back and motioned to the seat next to Ron, and Hermione responded by sitting down in Dumbledore’s armchair.

The silver Sirius put away his pocket watch. “Well, that’s more than ten minutes, but I didn’t want to interrupt your fun. There will be no more tasks tonight; now you just have to listen to me. I’ve written letters for most of you, some longer than others. There are a few things I want to get off my chest, but I’ll try to manage that as I discuss the bequests. There are handouts – no need for note-taking, class.

“I am the custodian of two piles of money and property, my own and the Black Family Trust. Now, I imagine you’re wondering how an escaped prisoner has control of the Trust? Strictly speaking, I don’t, but I shall. This will isn’t worth the pensieve it’s sitting in, unless my rights are restored. If you’re watching this, I’ve been pardoned or forgiven or something along those lines. In that event, the frozen assets in the Trust revert to me unless the next male heir in succession reaches adulthood first. Special thanks should be extended to my dear mother, by the way, for going batty before she could restructure the Trust. Some of my money has been frozen, and some has not. If this will is being read, then everything has been freed up again. Let’s start with the Trust, shall we?”

The silver Sirius produced a piece of flickering parchment and a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. I never saw those before, Harry thought. With the small glasses perched near the end of his nose, Sirius began to read from the document.

“I hereby divide the monetary assets of the Black Family Trust into twenty-two shares of equal size, to be distributed as follows: two shares each to Andromeda Black Tonks, Nymphadora Tonks and Theodore Tonks; four shares to Narcissa Black Malfoy, with two of the four shares accruing to Draco Malfoy upon reaching his majority; four shares to Arthur and Molly Weasley, with one share each accruing to Ronald and Ginevra Weasley upon reaching their majorities; one share each to William, Charles, Alfred and George Weasley; one share to Harry James Potter; one share reserved in the trust for the future spouse of Harry Potter, whom I hope will be worthy of him; and two additional shares to be reserved in the trust. Narcissa Black Malfoy will receive one reserved share should she divorce and formally forsake Lucius Malfoy. Draco Malfoy shall receive one

reserved share should he formally forsake Lucius Malfoy. To Percival Weasley, I leave a rubber Galleon and a swift kick in the arse as a reward for turning his back on his family.” Sirius looked up again, and added menacingly, “I have no other living family members. I want that to be perfectly clear.”

He paused before continuing, “The secondary lines of inheritance are complicated. It’s all been written, witnessed, and so forth. If anyone I name at any time during this business is already dead, then first, my condolences, and second, call Diggle and have him straighten it out.”

From the document in his hand, he read, “The Black ancestral property shall be sold, and the proceeds divided as stipulated in the Trust charter.” He glanced up and smiled faintly. “That should put quite a bit of cash back into the Trust. Your shares should be generous if Diggle does his job.”

Looking back down, he continued, “Ownership of the property at 12 Grimmauld Place is retained by the Black Family Trust until Harry Potter reaches the age of seventeen. Upon reaching the age of seventeen, Mr. Potter shall take ownership of the property. There are two conditions of ownership, applicable both to the Trust and to Mr. Potter. The first condition is that the owner must afford Remus Lupin lodging for the remainder of his natural existence, should Mr. Lupin so choose, for the sum of one Galleon per year. The second condition is that the owner shall provide safe haven to Narcissa Black Malfoy and/or Draco Malfoy, at any time that either may seek it. Lucius Malfoy is not welcome at 12 Grimmauld Place under any circumstance.”

Sirius stopped and looked up, took off his glasses, and sneered. “A friend has helped me prepare something very special for dear Lucius. If he ever enters the house, it will be an experience he’ll never forget.”

With his glasses replaced, he continued, “Now, to my own possessions. To Harry Potter, I bequeath all of my personal monies, including those found at Gringotts Wizarding Bank and those on my person, and all of my personal effects not otherwise specified. In addition, I bequeath to him the other property that accrues to me via

the Trust.” Sirius looked up from the parchment. “Diggle has all of the information for you, Harry.”

He continued reading, “As my ward, Harry Potter inherits the rights accorded to my eldest heir with respect to the Black Family Trust, and any titles or other hereditary privileges afforded to the primary heir of the House of Black. However, I voluntarily terminate any parental rights over Harry that accrue to me, and oppose the assumption of those rights by any other.”

Sirius lowered the parchment. “Harry, I’m going to catch a cauldron of hot oil for doing that. Remember, all of you, no cursing my name tonight! I’m no father, Harry. I thank you for humouring me now and again, but it would have been an injustice to you – trifling, perhaps, but an injustice all the same. There’s great injustice in what Peter allowed to be visited upon you and your parents, but there’s worse to be found than that. The greatest injustice I have ever known is found in what the adults in your life for the past fifteen years have done to you, Harry.”

“Shame on you!” Sirius shouted, pointing randomly around the room. “Shame on everyone who could have done better! You let Lily’s accursed relatives abuse Harry for ten years! It’s amazing that he wasn’t destroyed! Since then, you’ve alternated between treating him like a spoiled child and a common criminal, and you’ve stuck him back in that hell every summer! Shame on you! Shame on you, Dumbledore!”

The silver Sirius threw his parchment down. “I’m freeing him from you. How do you like that? If he wants to serve you, he can do it with his eyes wide open. How dare you hide things from him and deceive him! How dare you condemn him to death! His fate is his to decide, not yours, and certainly not some bloody seer.” Harry heard a few sharp intakes of air at that.

Sirius stooped to pick up the parchment, and adjusted his glasses. “Harry, life is so precious, and it’s so short. Dumbledore’s the oldest person I know, and I’d wager even he would agree that it’s too short. Don’t waste it. You know carpe diem, right? Seize the day? Not good enough. Carpe momentum, Harry. Carpe momentum. Enjoy your

friends. Spend some money. Find love; if you're lucky, you'll make out as well as your parents in that department. Life is so short, Harry, but your parents – they lived, lad. This is all I can do to help you on your way, and I'm so sorry for that. Shame on the adults, Harry. Shame on Dumbledore. Shame on me, Harry."

His voice faltered. "Shame on me. I wasn't there, and in that, I failed you just as surely as everyone else." He stopped to wipe at his eyes with his fingers. "Now... uh, right. Make sure you go and pick up your birthday present at the appropriate time - it's a corker. Diggle, be sure the little package is in the box. That's all, Harry. The rest is in the letter and my journal."

Reading from the parchment, he went on, "Sufficient funds shall be withheld from my personal accounts to provide Remus Lupin with a salary of 2,500 Galleons per annum for the remainder of his natural life. In exchange, Remus will serve as conservator for Harry Potter's affairs in Muggle England as may be required until Harry reaches the age of twenty-one. Remus will also serve as life trustee for the reserves held in the Black Family Trust." He looked up, a wistful expression on his face. "Moony, my old friend, you've made your feelings clear. This is as close as I can come to honouring them. Watch over him, please."

He glanced at the parchment, and said, "Ah, here it comes. I love this one... sufficient funds shall be drawn from my personal accounts to establish the Sirius Black Memorial Quidditch Trust. The sole beneficiary of the Trust will be the Head of Gryffindor House at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and the sole purpose for which the funds may be used is the biennial purchase of international standard brooms for the use of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. McGonagall, run Slytherin into the fucking pitch." Professor McGonagall gasped and Mrs. Weasley let forth an outright shriek.

He looked up with a smirk and said, "It's in writing just that way, as a matter of fact. That also provides a nice segue to the good Professor Snape, don't you think?" Sirius lowered the parchment. "Severus," he said, "I'm leaving you the potions portion of the Black family library. Not only do I think you'll find it useful, but some of the books would be dangerous in less capable hands. The other thing I offer you is my

forgiveness. I mean that, and I hope you can find your way to do the same for me. It should be easier for you now that I'm dead. I know that I find it easier this way."

He returned to reading. "I bequeath my personal collection of books and all contents of the Black family library with the exception of the potions section to Hermione Granger, as well as sufficient funds to provide her with a perpetual annual book allowance of 500 Galleons." He stopped reading, and looked out toward the audience that had been imaginary to him. "Hermione, you may want to hand some of the books straight off to Pince, so that they're properly binned or tossed into the Hogwarts Restricted Section. I know this bequest is a trifle when compared to everything you've done for Harry. I'm struck by your love of books. We have that in common – or had, is it? Tenses are so hard to keep straight when you're dead."

The silver Sirius smiled and added, "I've got a few things for the Weasleys, as well. Ron, an old friend left something in my possession quite a long time ago and I don't know of anyone else who would appreciate it as much as you. You've been there whenever Harry's needed you, and you deserve this. I leave you a Quaffle signed by all the players and reserves from the 1892 Chudley Cannons, along with an authentic season programme and team roster."

Ron burst out, "Bloody hell!" which was immediately followed by a remonstrance from Mrs. Weasley and a scattering of laughter that drowned out a few of Sirius' words.

Sirius kept talking, of course. "...and George Weasley are the only rightful heirs to Messrs. Moony, Padfoot and Prongs that Hogwarts has known. I can think of no one else more deserving of my remaining supply of enchanted parchment, and my numerous journals detailing parchment charms, hexes, and other marauding mischief. Sorry, Moony, but you're not quite as much fun as you used to be. Boys, be sure to misuse them wisely."

Fred and George fell all over themselves, laughing, crying, pointing to Lupin, and bowing and scraping to Sirius' ghostly image, as he continued, "As for Ginny Weasley... Ginny, thank you for sharing your musical abilities with me last summer. You're a natural secret keeper,

so I'll wager that you haven't told a soul. Musical passion has to be indulged, and you shouldn't keep it bottled up. You have great potential, and you can still live up to it if you start now. I've never regretted lending you the Black family violin, and now I leave it to you along with all the sheet music that goes with it. It's very, very old – in the family for over 150 years, you know – so it needs tender care, but I'm certain you can handle it. It may yet have a few surprises for you, Ginny, but I promise with all my heart that it's not cursed."

"Shacklebolt, old boy," Sirius smirked, "I begin by extending my eternal gratitude to you for constantly missing your target. I'm sorry to say this, but I was very glad not to see you. I'm also leaving you... let's get it right..." He peered at the document. "I bequeath to Kingsley Shacklebolt my collection of personal arms and defensive gear. In addition, sufficient funds shall be withheld from my personal accounts to provide Mr. Shacklebolt with a one-time stipend of 5,000 Galleons, in exchange for providing Harry Potter with regular personal training in the use of arms and defence against the Dark Arts."

He replaced his glasses and scowled. "To Albus Dumbledore, I place in your hands sufficient funds to provide for the remaining education of Harry Potter, Hermione Granger, Ronald Weasley, and Ginevra Weasley. Teach them what they need to know. Protect them within reason. Free them to find their own way.

He flung away the parchment. "Diggle, I'm sure you've already set my instructions for Grimmauld Place into motion. While you're at it, be sure to set Buckbeak free. If there's a body, burn it and toss the ashes anywhere you like. I've become accustomed to travelling light, so no memorial, and certainly no sending. I never believed in any of that rot – sorry, Lils. If you want to slide off to the nearest pub and get good and pissed, that's all right by me. Well, that's everything. Be seeing all of you soon enough." The silver Sirius bowed. The room remained still and silent as the flickering apparition of Sirius Black sank into itself and faded into nothingness.

The moment that Sirius was gone, Draco Malfoy jumped from his seat as though he had sat on a tack. "That man was a raving lunatic! I

can't believe this is happening!" He jabbed his finger toward Diggle. "We will protest this – this – outrage!" The room erupted.

Ron turned on Malfoy, shouting, "It's fair and square, you bloody ferret!" Draco lunged, his mother clung to the back of his shirt, and Mr. Weasley interposed himself.

Snape and McGonagall moved quickly toward the developing melee. McGonagall snapped, "Boys, stop this at once! Show some reason!"

Snape hissed, "I agree – let's all be reasonable. That would be a welcome antidote to Black's folly."

McGonagall turned on Snape, "What folly would that be, Severus?" she demanded.

Snape snarled back, "You must have loved all this, Minerva; looking forward to running us into the pitch, I imagine? I wish that Draco were right about Black, but he is not; Black was no lunatic. He was simply cruel. He couldn't help himself – it was an accident of birth."

Narcissa Malfoy and Andromeda Tonks exclaimed as one voice, "Excuse me?"

Snape said, "I am sorry, Narcissa – Draco, sit! – I am sorry but I am also correct. Perhaps it was different in your household, but I had the misfortune of meeting Black's parents. He was born to be calculating and cruel, and he died that way. Look at what he has accomplished!"

Ron yelled, "Sod off, Snape! You hated him, he forgave you, and you can't handle it!"

McGonagall's eyes became saucers. "Mister Weasley! Sit down now! You will not speak to Professor Snape that way!" Hermione, who had also moved toward the fray, pulled hard on Ron's arm.

Snape turned on Ron, and shoved him down into his chair. "Anything between Black and me is none of your damned business, boy!" he raged.

Molly Weasley bumped Snape back with her chest, hands on hips. "Don't you handle my son that way, you insufferable git!"

Ron said darkly, "I can handle myself, mum."

Molly barked, "Be quiet and stay in your seat!" without looking at Ron, and then bumped Snape again. "I've had it with you! Why they have allowed you to poison an entire generation of Hogwarts students with your..."

Arthur Weasley said gently, "Molly, please calm down, and –"

Snape cut him off. "This is between me and your pushy, overbearing wife –" Arthur swung and his fist connected with Snape's nose. Snape stumbled backward, clutched at his face, and muttered, "Blood..." Arthur lunged for him.

Ron shouted, "Get him, Dad!" as Mrs. Weasley tried to restrain her husband. Lupin rushed across the room, and Dumbledore rose from his armchair.

"Enough!" Harry had seen Dumbledore rise, and assumed that he was now putting a stop to things, but it was Narcissa Malfoy who had screeched as loudly as she could. "I said 'enough'!" Everyone and everything seemed to stop in mid-sentence, mid-swing or mid-stride.

"Severus," Narcissa said, her quiet voice rebounding in the stilled room, "Sirius didn't accomplish this; we've done it on our own. Look at us!" She looked to her sister, and said firmly, "There will be no protest," before she turned to her son and repeated with force, "No protest."

Draco began, "But –"

His mother cut him off firmly. "Think of your own reaction if one of your cousins chose to interfere with a decision that should have been left to you. This was Sirius' decision to make. Be grateful and be quiet."

“But what he said about Father, he had no right –” Draco whimpered.

Narcissa Malfoy stopped her son with a wave of her hand. “I’m tired. Mr. Diggle, I shall be in touch. Come, Draco.” She swept from the room without another word, followed closely by her son.

Dumbledore said, “It is growing late. Dedalus, let us finish any other business that may be required this evening. Would everyone please take a seat?”

Snape fled the room and Mr. Weasley sat down, which was accepted by everyone as an invitation to do the same. Diggle sat behind the table and twitched.

“Dedalus, other business?” Dumbledore prompted.

Diggle patted at his brow with a brightly coloured handkerchief. “Yes – yes, of course. Are there, er, does anyone have specific questions?”

Ron asked eagerly, “How big is the Trust? What’s a share?” Harry felt a flicker of irritation; Ron would be the one to ask about the money, wouldn’t he? he thought.

Diggle rifled through parchment. “An excellent question, one for which I should have an answer... Most of the corpus was spent, prior to the disposal of property... and there were expenses related to the reinstatement of certain titles and privileges... ah, here it is. As of this morning, the monetary proceeds in the trust totalled... hmmm; carry the four... uh... four hundred and sixty-three thousand, three hundred thirty two Galleons and change. That would leave a share value of, what, around twenty-one thousand Galleons?”

Ron let out a low whistle. “We’re rich,” he said nervously. Harry heard Ted Tonks clear his throat. He turned slightly and noticed that Mr. Tonks’ brow was furrowed.

Mrs. Weasley said to Ron, “We’ve always been rich, Ron. Now we have some money to go with it.”

Ron asked Diggle, "What about the other pot of money?"

Mrs. Weasley snapped at Ron, "Don't be impertinent!" Harry shook his head in frustration.

Diggle looked at Ron suspiciously. "Mr. Weasley, I really don't believe that's your concern. The lion's share of Mr. Black's assets goes to Mr. Potter. I really don't see –"

"Tell him," Harry snapped. "It may as well be in the clear. I wouldn't want Ron to fester over it."

"I don't fester," Ron retorted.

"If you insist, Mr. Potter," Diggle said nervously. "Mr. Black's assets come from a wider variety of sources than the Trust. I'll have to calculate... I hope you'll be satisfied with an estimate... subtracting the amounts for the Quidditch trust and Mr. Lupin's support... and the funds for schooling... less unpaid taxes... I think I can provide a rough estimate. I am withholding enough for the Quidditch Trust to earn 5,000 Galleons per year in interest, and I am setting aside enough reserve to pay Mr. Lupin for 75 years –"

"Quite an optimist," said Lupin.

"Just being prudent," returned Diggle. "Another 20,000 Galleons to perpetuate Miss Granger's book buying, 55,000 Galleons for Ministry back taxes, and around forty percent of Mr. Black's Muggle funds to cover taxes and other legal matters. The remainder amounts to the additional Trust property in Scotland to which Mr. Black referred... and about 4,000 Galleons... and somewhere in the neighbourhood of two-and-one-half million pounds."

Ron asked Hermione, "What, is that a lot?" She nodded, and Ron's mouth hardened into a thin line.

Harry decided he'd had his fill of Ron for the evening. "Mr. Diggle," he said, feigning innocence, "why don't you tell Ron what's in my vault as well?"

Hermione snapped, "Harry!"

Harry stared at Ron, unflinching. "Come on, Ron, I know you're dying to know. It's burning a hole in you, isn't it?" Ron turned red; Harry knew it was from anger, not embarrassment.

Diggle fidgeted. "I don't really... I'm not certain that..."

Harry said, "You must know; we just went over my assets last night."

Dumbledore said from the back of the room, "Harry, do not do this."

Diggle was still fidgeting. "Well, um, Harry, uh, are you just interested in your vault... er, the money set aside for your current use? The Potter Trust is a large and complicated..."

Ron said through clenched teeth. "I want to know."

Hermione glared at Harry, then at Ron. "Let it drop, both of you," she warned.

Ron stood up. "You wanted to dangle this in front of me, eh, Harry? What, so you could be big and important? Fine, then – show me how little I am, Harry. I'm nothing next to you, am I?"

Harry wavered. "Ron, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. That's not what I meant to –"

"Spill it!" Ron snapped.

"Ron, I don't even know," Harry said. "I mean, I was just briefed for the first time on the Trust..."

Ron exploded. "I – want – to – know!"

Hermione pleaded, "Please let this go, Ron. Please."

Harry knew he'd taken things too far. "Ron, I'm sorry I baited you, mate; it was wrong. If you let this go, I'll ... I'll give you anything you want. I'll... I'll give you fifty percent, sight unseen – fifty percent of whatever's in my personal vault. The money has never mattered to me, Ron – you know that."

Ron hesitated. "You'll give me anything I want?"

Harry said, "Name it."

Ron nodded. "Stay away from Hermione."

Harry and Hermione both froze.

"Did you hear me? I said stay away from Hermione," Ron repeated.

Hermione turned on Ron. "Am I your property, Ronald? You prat!"

"That's not something I can give you. I'm sorry," said Harry.

Ron's fists were tightly balled. "You said you'd give me anything I ask. So now you're a liar, too."

"RONALD WEASLEY!" Hermione shouted.

"I couldn't have imagined you'd ask me to stay away from my best friend," said Harry. "I don't know you. I hope the real Ron comes back from wherever you've stashed him."

"Your best friend, is she?" said Ron, with ice in his voice. "I used to think that was me. At least I know where I stand. I don't want anything from you, not your filthy money, not your pity – not anything."

"You know what Sirius had me swear?" Ron asked Hermione. "He had me swear that I would stand by Harry, just as he would stand by me. I signed it, just like the two of you said I should. I swore an oath that if the time comes, I'll protect Harry at all costs, above everything

else, including you. He mentioned you by name! How do you feel about your precious Sirius now, eh? Do you suppose he figured you'd live long enough to enjoy the books?"

Before Mrs. Weasley managed to rebuke Ron, Hermione's open hand made a loud crack! against his cheek. "You don't know anything!" Hermione shrieked. Ron cringed and ran out of the room.

Mr. Weasley said meekly, "Terribly sorry, everyone," before hurrying after Ron.

Mrs. Weasley stared at Hermione for a moment, and then said, "He'll calm down, dear." To the rest of the stunned room, she said, "We'll be going now. Good night." George and Fred meekly walked out. Ginny – her face returned to normal by Dumbledore – hissed at Harry, "You shouldn't have pushed him," as she passed.

Harry moved to comfort Hermione, reaching out for her. She jerked her arm away from him. "I'm so tired of all this!" she snapped.

Dumbledore extended his arms and enveloped Hermione into a gentle embrace. He said, "Kingsley, would you and Mr. Moody be so kind as to escort the Grangers home?"

Harry said his goodbyes to the Tonks family. Lupin and Dumbledore followed them into the corridor. Hermione lingered by the doorway. I can't let her leave like this, he decided, and he stood beside her.

Once he started talking, Harry couldn't stop. "Hermione, I'm so sorry about, well, everything. I know I'm responsible. I stirred him up and I knew I was doing it. It was so foolish. The things he said, they're so hard to forgive. But I'll try, Hermione, I swear I'll try. I swear I'll –"

"I was here," she said, "I saw what happened. I – I still need to talk to you, soon."

Before he could register what she was doing or what was happening, she darted forward and kissed Harry on the cheek; she pulled back with a startled look on her face. "Happy birthday, Harry," she said. Harry's watch showed five minutes after midnight. Hermione walked

out to meet her parents, and Harry understood that he wasn't supposed to follow.

Diggie reminded Harry to open the birthday package from Sirius. Dumbledore was the last to leave Gringotts. He promised to send unction for the cut on Harry's forehead, and gave Lupin and Harry a portkey that took them within a modest walk of the Lion's Den.

Harry dashed to his room upon returning, rifled through the box from Sirius and found a small package. Inside was a splinter of hardwood, and loopy writing on a small scrap. The note said:

Happy sixteenth birthday, Harry! This portkey can be used only once. It will activate at eight o'clock on any morning after you open this package. I've been arranging your gift for over a year, so at least pretend that it's smashing. Be sure to show it off – I guarantee that some people won't approve.

- S.B.

Harry wasn't sure whether to be excited or concerned. He knew that if the will were an indication, any gift that Sirius Black had spent more than a year concocting would surely be interesting. He asked Dobby to rouse him by seven o'clock.

Once in bed, Harry played back the evening in his mind. Over the course of a few hours, he had found out that Snape was the eavesdropper at the Hog's Head; had made Snape suffer for launching an Occlumency attack; had made up with Ron, and then broken off again; had made Draco Malfoy's ears bleed; had been sucked into Voldemort's mind and then attacked; had been driven into multiple conversations with Dumbledore; had found out that Mrs. Malfoy didn't betray Sirius to Voldemort, and that she apparently wanted him to save Draco from something; had discovered that Ginny loved music, thought that she loved him, and apparently didn't love herself; had nearly been eaten alive by Mr. and Mrs. Granger, and had been alternately fussed-over and reviled by Mrs. Weasley; had told Hermione how much he cared for her, and had found out that Hermione cared for him; had received a year's worth of hugs;

and had received one kiss on the cheek that he didn't fully understand and couldn't shake off. He had to will himself to sleep.

Chapter Six

BIRTHDAY GIFTS

July 31, 1996

Fawkes flashed into Harry's room at a quarter past seven . The phoenix bore a letter and a small package:

- - - - -

Harry –

I offer you my best wishes upon your sixteenth birthday. The Hogwarts Board of Governors has requested a meeting that will take up most of the day. If all goes as expected, I shall find you this evening. I bid you an excellent day. After last evening's events, some enjoyment is well deserved.

Please do employ the enclosed salve. Madam Pomfrey advises that it be applied twice daily for a period of three days.

Fondly,

Albus P.W.B. Dumbledore

- - - - -

Harry couldn't fathom Dumbledore – furious when Harry signed the will, but doting after the will was read. I don't understand your master – do you, Fawkes? Harry wondered as the phoenix disappeared.

There was a small silver bottle inside the package, labelled as 'Phlostion Philligree's Scar-Away Salve'. Harry went into the bathroom and stood before the mirror. He dabbed the thick concoction onto the fresh cut at one side of his forehead, and frowned at the lightning bolt scar on the other side. On a whim he smeared the excess salve on his finger across the vivid scar; it bubbled and then disappeared in a wisp of vapour. With a sigh, he turned away. Harry was marked and

nothing could change that. He readied himself for the day and then headed for the front door.

Lupin looked up from papers strewn across the dining table just as Harry's hand touched the doorknob. "What's this?" he asked.

"Sirius left me a portkey set for eight o'clock," Harry said.

"He... what?" Lupin burst from his chair. "A portkey? Are you mad? How do you know who actually created it?"

"It was in a package he left for me. Here – I'll show you the note," Harry said.

Lupin held the note at arm's length and squinted at it. "It's Sirius's handwriting, at any rate – oh! Of course – it's about the birthday gift." He shook his head. "Setting a portkey with a timed trigger based upon opening of a package... he did have his talents, didn't he?"

"So you knew about the gift?" asked Harry.

"Sirius lacked the patience to hold secret a gift; I'm surprised he didn't give it up months ago," Lupin said with a soft laugh. "I have a rough idea where you'll be headed. Would you agree to meet me in front of Flourish and Blotts at, say, eleven o'clock? If I can't be there, I'll send the Weasley twins in my stead."

"That seems fair," Harry decided. He glanced at his watch and rushed outside of the Lion's Den just before he felt the familiar tug behind his navel.

He regained his balance inside what looked to be a workshop of some kind. Filtered sunlight came through windows set high on one side of the room. There were stacks of wood here, logs and sticks there. An entire wall was taken up with a huge rack of tools and equipment. Adjacent to one workbench were rows of shelves filled with all manner of vials, jars, and other things Harry couldn't identify. Next to the other workbench were bins of various sizes, large bins standing on the floor and small ones hung from the wall, holding

screws, wire, straw, bristles and other materials. A C-clamp attached to that workbench held an unfinished broomstick. Something fairly large sat in one corner, draped by a heavy sheet.

“Welcome to my workshop, Mr. Potter. May I call you Harry?” The man standing in the shadows had wild dark hair strewn with grey that tumbled down past his shoulders. He had a severe face with a regal nose and bold eyebrows that peaked like arches. He was wearing common working clothes, covered by a full-length leather apron.

“ ‘Harry’ would be fine. Steady on... I know your face...” Harry said.

The man smiled. “Perhaps you saw me at the Hogwarts Cup finals; I attend when I’m able. Interesting match last year, wasn’t it? I doubt it would have been as competitive had you been playing.”

Harry asked, “Obviously you know who I am. Who are you?”

The man gave Harry an exaggerated bow. “Devlin Whitehorn at your service, sir.”

Harry’s eyes grew wide. “Devlin... Devlin Whitehorn? Nimbus-racing-broom Devlin Whitehorn? Bloody hell! It’s a real pleasure, Mr. Whitehorn! Did Sirius have a broom made for me? This is too much! My friend Ron would –” He stopped. Ron would kill to be here, he thought, provided that I was somewhere else.

Whitehorn arched one of his eyebrows even higher. “Slow down, Harry,” he said. “I can explain everything, but it’ll be easier if I simply show you.” He led Harry toward the corner of the room.

Under the sheet was a motorbike. It was big, mostly black and chrome except for the red fuel tank painted with a silver arc and the word “Triumph”.

Harry gasped. “I used to dream about a flying motorbike,” he said; “My uncle yelled at me for it. Did this belong to Sirius, then?”

“I created this for him when he was just eighteen,” Whitehorn said. “She’s a 1969 Triumph Bonneville... in a way. Muggles in the know consider this particular Bonnie to be a classic... more of an antique now, I suppose. A fellow by the name of Diggle – you know him, I imagine? – contacted me a few months past through a friend of a friend of an associate, that sort of thing, to ask if I could restore something I’d built a long time ago. I never dreamt it would be this. The letter from Black was quite a surprise. It was... it was good to hear from him.” He seemed wistful, Harry thought.

Harry ran his hand along the seat. The motorbike flickered for a moment, shrank slightly, and then returned to the way it was before. He quickly whipped his hand back.

“As I said, this is only a Bonnie in a way,” Whitehorn reminded him. “You’ve just stumbled across one trick. She can adjust to the size of the rider, to a point. The last fellow to ride her must have been terribly large. When I received her, she was at least twice the normal size; it was a terrible time settling her down, I can tell you.”

Harry asked, “May I sit...?”

Whitehorn smiled. “Go ahead, she is yours.”

Harry slipped one leg over the top of the seat and carefully sat down. The motorbike didn’t flicker this time. He reached forward and held the handlebars, leaning forward a little. There was a quiver and then the handlebars extended toward him until he could grasp them comfortably.

“ She’ll adjust for your posture and positioning, just like a professional standard broom,” Whitehorn said, “but only a bit at a time. It wouldn’t do for a Muggle to see a motorbike lose a foot in length, now would it?”

Harry asked, “You can ride it on the road, then, as well as fly?”

“She appears to run like a normal bike,” Whitehorn replied. “You’re actually flying at a fixed height. She’ll even bank around a curve like she’s rolling on the tyres.”

Harry turned the handlebars from side to side very easily. He had expected more resistance.

Whitehorn said, “You don’t want just anyone to sit down and take off. We need to key her to you.” He took out his wand, and said, “Abalienato.” The motorbike shimmered, and Harry started to get off.

“Stay on the seat,” Whitehorn commanded. “Take your wand, touch it to the handlebars, and say possessio, followed by your full name.”

Harry took out his wand, and said, “Possessio Harry James Potter!” The shimmering stopped.

“She’s all yours, Harry,” said Whitehorn. “No one else can ride her, unless you permit it.”

“How do I give permission?” asked Harry.

“It’s all in the manual,” Whitehorn returned. “You’ll need to read it later, cover-to-cover. We’ll spend some time going over the basics, though. You’ll leave here able to manage a simple ride without being picked up by the Ministry – or worse, by the Muggle constabulary.”

Harry ran his hand along the fuel tank. It feels powerful, he thought. “There are rules about enchanting Muggle artefacts. Is this going to get me sent to Azkaban if someone finds out about it?”

Whitehorn smiled broadly. “No worries there. This is a broomstick.”

Harry looked at him like he’d gone quite barmy. “Erm... it’s a motorbike.”

“It’s a broomstick and it may be my greatest professional achievement, which I don’t say lightly,” Whitehorn insisted. “I had to convince a jinni to assist with the spell work; I don’t recommend that,

by the way. If you want to see what you're sitting on, hold the handlebars and say Abscondo Triumph."

Harry said it, and the motorbike disappeared. He was seated on a long pole suspended atop two narrow sawhorses, each where a wheel had been. A clamp on the front sawhorse held a T-shaped assembly with wooden cylinders that rested in his hands where the handle grips had been.

Whitehorn pointed at various spots on the wood frame. "The original frame was all oak, but Black asked that I upgrade the performance. Thankfully I made two more of these over the last twenty years, so I had a number of ideas in mind. Now it's a mix of oak, sunset maple and some ridiculously rare tropical hardwoods, all carefully crafted to look like scrap. It has a cushioning charm over the entire run of the seat and overlapping onto the frame, and a new braking charm of my own design. In essence, you're riding a twin Nimbus racing broom. She's fast – very fast – but do understand that she won't handle quite like a broomstick; she's much more massive and less aerodynamic, see? It's a challenge to run her along the ground, but you've quick reflexes so it should come easily for you. There are wand cores in those cylinders so that you can control her movement without waving your wand about in public. It's not like using your own wand, but you don't need a lot of power to control the charms. Why don't you bring her back? Say Ostendo Triumph."

Harry said "Ostendo triumph!" and the motorbike reappeared in place of the wooden frame. "So how do I ride?" he asked.

"You get her to run like a Muggle motorbike by saying Veho Triumph. You say Evolo Triumph to fly. You control speed with the throttle – turn the handle grip, just like this – and you control the braking charm with the handbrakes. There's a clutch but it's only for show. You don't need to shout at her, by the way – shouting a spell is for schoolboys. She'll respond to a whisper. If you're practiced enough, she'll even take to silent casting." Whitehorn shook his head. "Can you imagine the looks you'd get, shouting at a motorbike on the street?"

“Nothing like the looks I’d get flying over people’s heads,” Harry pointed out.

“Not a problem, Harry,” Whitehorn assured him. “Say Occultus Triumph – say it quietly, don’t shout it out.” The motorbike around Harry disappeared and he along with it.

“Fateor Triumph will bring you back,” Whitehorn added. “It’s good for about two hours at a time; wood doesn’t hold that particular charm as well as metal. If you use it for two full hours, give it two hours before you try again.”

Harry returned to view and asked, “If Muggles think this is a real motorbike, what are the chances it would get nicked sitting on the street?”

“Fairly high, I imagine,” admitted Whitehorn. “There are two ways to address that. The first is to lash it to something, like a Muggle would; I’ve set aside an Unbreakable Chain and Lock for you. The second is to carry her along.”

“Awfully big for that, eh?” Harry laughed. “I suppose I could use reducing and feather-light charms.”

“She’s already over-charmed for that,” Whitehorn said; “You don’t want to cast too many casual charms atop permanent charms, right? That goes for cleaning as well – you use a good wand polishing kit on her, right? For reducing, you stand off to one side, hold a handgrip, and say Recondo Triumph – just a whisper, mind you. To bring her back, set her on the ground, put your hand on top so you’re catching the handlebars, and say Redintegro Triumph. She’ll easily fit in your pocket when reduced.” Harry climbed off the seat and reduced the motorbike to an inch in length and the weight of a single Galleon.

Once the Bonnie was returned to full size, Harry and Whitehorn spent a good deal of time going over the basics of imitating a motorbike on the roads and motorways. Even balance had to be relearned to a small degree, but Harry was more than up for it.

When they were finished, Whitehorn produced two small leather bags from the workbench. A wide leather strap connected them to one another. "Here are the saddlebags," he said. "You sling this strap over the seat, and tie these underneath. I've got your manual in there, and the chain and lock, and some lashings to hold bigger items to the back of the seat. Black asked for something else as well – in that envelope there." Sirius' scrawl was on the envelope; 'For an extra bit of freedom', it said. Inside was a scrap of heavy parchment.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Whitehorn said, "You'll need it for riding on Muggle roads, among other things. It's more or less the same principle as I used on the motorbike combined with some of the old Black magic, so to speak. Hold it and say, 'Harry Potter requires a motorbike licence'."

As soon as Harry finished saying the phrase, the parchment became an operator's licence with a picture of Harry's face at that moment, an address he didn't recognise, and his birth date. "The year's off," he noticed.

Whitehorn grinned. "Exactly. A year or two earlier, I imagine? That makes you old enough to ride."

Harry looked at the licence suspiciously. "You know I'm not old enough to have the motorbike, then? Why are you doing this? I'm terribly grateful of course, but..."

Whitehorn finished Harry's thought for him. "...But you have good reason to be suspicious; any wizard with half a brain could figure that." He conjured two simple wooden stools and they sat. Whitehorn's face took on a tired, weathered expression. Harry knew it well – he saw it each time that an Order member spoke of the last War.

Whitehorn began, "Times were tough back in the 70s, Harry. I hope we're not heading there again, but it's edging that way. Anyway, I met Black when he was bunking with your father's family –"

“Did you know my father?” Harry asked eagerly.

Whitehorn sighed. “Hard not to – he and Black were thick as brothers. I don’t know how your father ever found time to court your mother, really. I knew your grandfather better. Alexander was one of my original investors, you know?” he said. “They were good people, Harry, the both of them... and then there was Black.”

Whitehorn seemed to grin in spite of himself. “He was an original. I can’t imagine what all those years in Azkaban must have done to him, but in ’78 or ’79...” He closed his eyes and the grin turned into a smile. “Here comes this kid, ready to take on the universe, asking if I can help him find a flying motorbike. I ask him why, and he says to me – straight faced, mind you? – ‘You can only carry one bird at a time on a broomstick!’ What’s more, he meant it! If Sirius Black didn’t have a fit bird on each arm, then it was a bad night for him – a real hound, that one.

“Well, he didn’t have a cauldron to piss in at the time. His mother tossed him aside – not evil enough for her, according to Black. So he says to me, he says, ‘I’ll test anything you’ve got’, and he wasn’t taking the mickey either. I could hand him a ‘stick with completely untested charms and off he’d go, doing loops and side rolls at a hundred, hundred and ten. He came up with the Anti-Burglar Buzzer, too – said he got the idea from something called a ‘joyful buzzer’ as I remember it. He’d ride the bloody ‘sticks twelve hours a day and then he’d drag me to the clubs. Here I was, thirty-two, thirty-three years old, and this kid fresh from school is getting me dates.

“He picked up a few of my bad habits along the way, especially betting on Quidditch. That’s how Black paid for the bike, see? I had more or less decided to let him off the hook for it – he was just too much fun, for a start – but when he let me have the Buzzer gratis, that cinched it for me. Still, he comes up with this scam, and tells me he plans to work it against the wanker that his cousin had just been married off to. There was no warning him off so I shrugged and sat back to watch. He works it for half the season, and eventually manoeuvres the wanker to back Wimbourne over Montrose in the finals; as it happens, the wanker’s tight with Ludo Bagman. What the

wanker doesn't know is that Black's worked a deal with the bookmaker – he was taking a percentage of the wanker's losses as a sort of finder's fee. At the end of the season, he hands me 25,000 Galleons –”

Harry started laughing.

“What?” Whitehorn asked.

“I know who the wanker was,” Harry managed between snorts. “Lucius Malfoy... it had to be Lucius Malfoy.”

Whitehorn paled a bit. “Black liked trouble,” he admitted, “but sticking a Malfoy like that... well... it couldn't have happened to a nicer family, in truth. Anyway, I only kept 5,000 – the boy was dead broke, right? He goes off and invests the rest with some mad Muggles, and... things were turning, and I didn't see him much after that. You know the rest, I suspect?” Whitehorn stared off into space and his smile faded.

“You just told me more about Sirius in five minutes than his so-called friends managed in three years,” Harry said sadly.

Whitehorn seemed to think about that for a while before he said, “It's easy to forget that there were good times despite everything that happened in those days. I lost my share of friends and family, as most wizards did. I should thank you for making me dig up some fine memories – damn fine ones.”

They sat there for a while in the long shadows of the workshop, before Whitehorn went on, “You asked me why I did this. There are three reasons, I suppose. First, Black sent me an obscene amount of Muggle money, and I've found that a few pounds here and there can be dead useful. He wrote that it was the rest of my share from the wanker, thanks to those mad Muggles of his and years of accumulated interest. Second, I like a challenge. Even racing brooms become stale after a while. Third, the letter made it clear that she was for you. I reckon you'll make good use; with You-Know-Who back, maybe she'll get you out of a tight fix?”

“Did Sirius explain to you... you know, what really happened back then?” Harry asked gingerly.

Whitehorn said firmly, “There was nothing to explain. Sirius Black, a Death Eater? He would have cursed himself to death before he would have harmed your father or mother. I never believed a word of that tripe. At any rate, it was obvious to anyone with eyes that the Ministry was lying constantly at the end.”

Harry shook Whitehorn's hand. “Thank you so much. I mean, obviously it's the best birthday present I've ever had. But, it was his, you know, and – well, that means a lot to me.” Whitehorn looked a little puzzled to Harry, and it dawned on Harry that the man might assume that he and Sirius had never actually met.

Whitehorn said, “Use it well. Get in a little carousing, too. I'm sure that's what Black would have wanted.”

Harry hesitated. “Mr. Whitehorn?”

“Please, call me Devlin,” Whitehorn insisted.

Harry began, “Erm... Devlin, can I ask a huge favour? I don't have any right, but...”

Whitehorn smiled. “Ask it,” he said.

Harry said, “I'd like to pick up two Nimbus 2001s, and I'd really appreciate it if you might sign one for me.”

Whitehorn frowned. “I don't really keep them lying around, you know? There's no company business transacted here. This is my private workshop and I do try to maintain what privacy I can, but I'm still besieged by special requests. That's why I don't go out much except for Quidditch matches, and it's the reason I had you use a portkey.”

Harry cast his eyes down. “I understand, sir, believe me. I'm in the Prophet every other day. Right now I guess I'm saviour of the world,

and last year I was a deranged menace. Everyone stares at my scar... I understand. I don't want to intrude on your privacy."

Whitehorn nodded, and then glanced around the room as though he were looking for intruders. "I suppose you would understand, wouldn't you? You won't tell anyone where we are, then?"

Harry brightened. "Not a soul, I swear it."

"Good enough, then. Follow me," Whitehorn said.

Harry reduced the Bonnie and placed it and the licence into one of the saddlebags, slung the wide strap over his shoulder, and followed Whitehorn to a narrow stairway. The stairway led to a winding hallway, then more stairs, a long corridor, and another set of stairs. Harry was fairly sure that they went down the same corridor twice, and he was absolutely certain he could never find Whitehorn's workshop again if he tried. The last set of stairs ended in a storeroom, filled with shelves and racks full of brooms.

A young man was stocking the shelves. "Mr. Whitehorn, sir! This is a surprise! What can we do for you today?"

"Hullo, Jackie," Whitehorn said. "I need two of the racing specials for my friend here, and I'll need a black Permaquill as well."

The stock boy's eyes ballooned. "You're going to sign them, sir? I mean – that is – you never..." He turned to Harry. "Quality Quidditch Supplies is at your service, sir." He went to a locked cabinet and brought out two long and highly polished wooden boxes.

"Should I include the cases, sir?" he asked Whitehorn.

"Why not?" Whitehorn replied. "Now, Harry, who should I make this out to?"

The stock boy's eyes widened in recognition. He spluttered, "Harry? You're Harry P-P-Potter?"

Harry forced a smile. "That's right," he said.

"It's an honour, Mr. P-Potter. All that stuff in the Prophet last year... erm... I thought it was a load of dung. Sir."

Harry shook the stock boy's hand. "That's nice of you to say," he told him.

Whitehorn cleared his throat. "Who are the brooms for?" he asked.

"One is for me, and the signed one is for my friend Ron – Ron Weasley," said Harry.

"Weasley... he's your keeper, isn't he? Say, wasn't his brother your House's seeker a few years back?" Whitehorn asked. "Seems to me that was the last time they took the Cup before you came along."

Harry nodded. "Charlie's smashing; he works with dragons in Romania now."

Whitehorn started writing on the second broom.

Harry said, "Wha... I only asked you to sign one of them... I don't want to impose."

Whitehorn smiled. "Oh, I insist on it," he said.

The stock boy said, "How will you be paying for these, Mr. Potter? I'll have to enquire, but on Mr. Whitehorn's word we can advance the price for you –"

Whitehorn cut him off. "On my account, Jackie."

Harry blurted, "That's not at all what I intended! Devlin, I can easily pay for these!"

Whitehorn shook Harry's hand, and then the stock boy's as well. "If you need to reach me, I'll accept your owl. I hope Weasley enjoys it; it's awfully quick for a Keeper, but I think he'll manage. Good luck to

both of you with the Cup this year. Oh – happy birthday!” With that, he disappeared up the narrow stairs.

“I’ll just wrap these cases for you, Mr. Potter, and mark the wrapping so you can tell them apart,” Jackie the stock boy said.

“Racing specials... what are these, anyway? I’ve seen the 2001s,” Harry said.

“These are Nimbus 2100-Rs,” Jackie said as he tied together the cases.

“I’ve never heard of a 2100-R; I’ve never heard of a 2100 at all,” admitted Harry.

“Oh, you probably wouldn’t have,” said Jackie. “The R series is meant for challenge racing, but Aidan Lynch is riding one next season and word is that they’ll be going into regular production. Mr. Carruthers had me set one in the window just last week.” He fashioned a simple handle for the cases from a light rope. Harry thanked him and walked out into the store.

Sun was streaming into the windows looking out on Diagon Alley; the rain had broken at last. The street was crowded. A knot of young boys and girls peered into the window at the Firebolt and the Nimbus 2100-R on display; their parents hovered nearby. On his way out, he overheard their conversation about the merits of various brooms. They looked to be near the age of first-years, he thought, but he didn’t recognise any of them.

“My brother has a Nimbus 2000, and he says they’re almost as good as a Firebolt,” one girl insisted.

“I’ll never get to ride anything like those in my whole life,” a boy said dejectedly.

Harry leaned in. “You know, Gryffindor House is going to be riding international standard brooms from now on,” he said.

The dejected boy looked at Harry curiously and then saw his forehead. "Eep! You're him!" he squeaked.

"Merlin! It's Harry Potter!" one of the girls said. Suddenly he found himself bombarded with questions, and several parents moved closer. He was both surprised and pleased that nearly all the questions were about Hogwarts and Quidditch. He seated himself on the kerb and chatted away, paying no mind to the expanding crowd of onlookers.

The girl whose brother had a Nimbus 2000 pointed at the Firebolt and asked, "So what's it really like riding one of these?"

Harry grinned mischievously. He untied his packages, unwrapped the package marked for him, and set the fine wooden case on the curb. "Is that what I think it is? But... but I thought you flew a Firebolt!" the girl asked.

"Just picked this up today," Harry said. He pointed to the boy who had first identified him. "You, what's your name?"

"Erm, Alastair, s-sir... Alastair Blitz," he stammered.

"Alastair, I need you to watch my things. Can you do that for me?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir!" the boy said brightly.

Harry opened the case and stood. The sleek racing broom rose effortlessly into his hand. Alastair goggled, and tugged on Harry's sleeve. "Is that – is that signed, Mr. Potter? By Devlin Whitehorn himself?" he asked in a reverent whisper. Harry nodded. The rest of the knot of children and even some of the parents murmured excitedly.

Harry took off his cloak and draped it over his saddlebags. He wore new denims and one of his hand-me-down boxing singlets. "So, what's your name?" he asked the curious girl.

"I'm Laura Davies," she replied, fidgeting.

“Are you Roger Davies’ sister?” Harry asked. She nodded nervously.

Harry said, “I know Roger. He’s quite a good Chaser.” The girl beamed.

A middle-aged witch who shared the girl’s features stepped forward and shook Harry’s hand. “Mr. Potter, I’m Mathilde Davies. My son speaks highly of you.”

Harry was surprised – he hadn’t particularly thought Roger Davies the type to speak highly of others. He smiled and said, “That’s nice to hear, ma’am. I think Laura here fancies a ride.”

Mrs. Davies’ eyebrows rose, and she looked nervously up and down the alley. “Do you think that’s wise?” she asked quietly.

Harry shrugged. “I’d think a brief flight up and down the alley would be safe enough,” he said. Wondering about the source of Mrs. Davies’ reaction, he added, “Together, of course! I imagine she’s not prepared to ride a broom of this calibre on her own?” He wasn’t sure, but he thought the girl was actually holding her breath.

“I assume you’ll stay at a reasonable speed?” Mrs. Davies said.

“I’m not about to get her hurt,” Harry replied. “Roger would kill me, I’m sure.” Mrs. Davies smiled and her daughter took in a lungful of air.

Harry perched himself on the 2100-R and held out his hand. “Well, come on, then – it’s you and me,” he said. There was a chorus of ‘No way!’ and ‘Wow!’ from her companions. Laura Davies looked as if she would burst. She took Harry’s hand and seated herself behind him.

“I’m just going to circle around once, right? Keep a tight hold,” he told her. She wrapped her arms around his stomach and giggled. He was true to his word and took a single swoop up and down Diagon Alley. He stayed at a relatively low speed but went through sufficient paces to sense the broom’s capabilities. A genuine grin broke out on

his face – it was even more responsive than the broom Sirius had given him.

“I’ve never gone so fast in my life – that was amazing!” she said breathlessly as Harry helped her down.

Harry beamed. “All right, who’s next?” he asked. There had to be something good about fame, he thought, and perhaps I’ve found it. He gave each of the children browsing at the window a turn after clearing it with their parents, before he returned the 2100-R to its case and wrapping. He tied the two packages back together again, shook hands with all the children and their parents, and donned his cloak. It was while he signed autographs for some of the children that he became aware of the dozens of people standing and watching him, many of whom politely applauded.

“Good form,” said Fred Weasley in Harry’s left ear. “Smashing flying, as usual.”

“I’d give it an E, I think,” added his brother George in Harry’s right ear. “It wasn’t fast enough for an O.”

Harry hadn’t heard them Apparate in. He smiled and shook hands with both twins. They were wearing jackets equal to the garish numbers from the day before. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“We were watching your demonstration,” George told Harry.

“We do have a shop here, you know,” chimed in Fred. “Surely you remember it?”

George nodded. “If you failed your O.W.L.s, Harry, it’ll be the start of a promising future on our sales floor.”

“We couldn’t put our partner to work!” Fred objected.

Harry picked up the saddlebags and the cases.

“We were both surprised to see you out here alone, Harry,” Fred said.

“It’s hard to believe that our, erm, protective friends aren’t swarming on you,” George agreed.

“They would be swarming on you right now, actually, if it weren’t for the foresight of our new Lord and master,” said Fred.

“Too true, too true – all hail Mister Moony!” George declared.

“Unusual knapsack you’ve got there, Harry,” Fred said.

“Do you have two new brooms in hand, Harry?” George asked.

“Very conspicuous consumption, Harry,” chided Fred. “Perhaps you’d like to increase your stake in Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes?”

Harry was half-dizzy trying to keep up with Ron’s brothers. “Umbridge made off with my Firebolt last year, and I still don’t know where it is,” he said. “I picked up the other broom for Ron –”

“A peace offering?” asked Fred.

“It was rather tense last night,” George observed.

Harry said, “I’ll show you everything if I can set down my things somewhere.”

Fred said, “Allow us, partner,” and took the cases from Harry.

George added, “We’ve been looking for an excuse to get you to the shop,” as he took the saddlebags.

As they walked, Harry asked, “So what’s all this partner business about? I don’t want you to pay back the 1000 Galleons. You do understand that, right?”

“Absolutely,” said Fred.

George shook his head. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Fred said, “We’re just giving you ten percent. It’s not a big deal.”

“Had it all drawn up nice and legal-like. You can have your stake now, being that we’re all adults,” George told him. “That’s one of the items for our next Annual Meeting.”

“We have Annual Meetings?” asked Fred.

“ Absolutely, brother. I must have mislaid your invitation – remember?” said George.

Fred feigned shock. “Oh – the Annual Meeting... right! Mislaid the invitation, eh? That’s a likely story,” he said.

George swatted at him and then announced, “Here we are, partner... so what do you think?”

Harry was silent for most of a minute before he managed, “It’s very... erm... visible.”

The storefront was painted iridescent green and it glittered with yellow and bluish highlights where the sun struck. A garish sign with the company logo - three stylised and interlocked Ws – hung above the door. Children and their parents mobbed the windows, and filled the store to near capacity. Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes made the Burrow seem calm by comparison – children randomly turned into canaries on one side of the store and projectile-vomited on the other side; parents stood clear either out of disdain or for the sake of safety. The store staff constantly called out “Scourgify!” but seemed to have as much fun as the customers. Harry quickly noticed that the workers were all female, young and pretty. Fred and George were clearly in their element. Just that quickly, it started – heads began to turn.

“Look, it’s Harry Potter!”

“I saw him down the street – he was giving broom rides! Can you believe it?”

“Let me see – where is he?”

“Are you sure it’s actually him?”

“Surely not – they must have hired an impostor for the day.”

The store had already been quite crowded, and Harry felt thoroughly mobbed. Fred and George cleared a path for him toward the counter at the rear of the store. George opened the storeroom door and quickly shuttled Harry’s things inside.

“Oh! Excuse me, Mr. Potter, I’m so sorry!” One of Fred and George’s staff was shoved flat into Harry; her forehead bumped into his nose and the rest of her pressed firmly into him.

“It’s not your fault. Here, let me get you out of this,” he said jauntily. She was undeniably attractive and he didn’t really mind her being shoved against him. He hoisted the young woman by the waist until she was seated on the counter, and then hopped up on the countertop himself.

Fred hollered to Harry over the din, “What are you doing? Hurry and slip back here!”

Harry waved him off and said, “Fetch George, would you?”

He took out his wand, cast *Sonorus*, and turned to face the crowd in the store. As soon as he began looking at faces in the crowd, he started to get nervous. He cleared his throat and it echoed through the room.

“Uh, sorry for that,” he said. “Look, I want to welcome all of you to Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes. Fred and George – where are Fred and George? – there you are – erm, Fred and George Weasley here are very good friends of mine, and I’m pleased to be at their shop. I’ve

used their fine products and I can tell you that you'll get a real bang out of them. Actually, you will get a bang out of quite a few of them."

Harry's nerves settled a bit atop polite laughter. He kept going, "I can guarantee that at least a hundred things in this store will make the list of banned items at Hogwarts" – there was more laughter – "and any store that can accomplish that in less than one year is pretty amazing. Have fun and buy lots of things. Thank you for coming!" The store erupted in applause, and Harry quickly hopped down behind the counter.

"We'll make it fifteen percent," quipped Fred.

"Twenty percent, then," added George, "and not a Knut more." Both twins burst into laughter.

Fred said, "You were great up there. I didn't know you could handle a crowd like that."

Harry was shaking a bit. "I think I'm going to spew up," he mumbled.

George laughed, "We're well used to that around here."

Customers rushed the counter.

"I'll take six of these, please!"

"Are you sure this antidote works?"

"Do you think Harry Potter would sign my Skiving Snackbox?"

Harry settled in on the steps beside the counter and signed a score of Snackboxes and a magazine or two before he ran into the storeroom to hide. Fred and George joined him eventually.

"That was a very good week's worth of transactions, all in half an hour!" exclaimed Fred.

“We can’t have you come by too often, Harry,” George said, fanning himself. “This old heart can’t take it!”

Harry shook his head. “I’ve had people all over me – Gringotts, then Quality Quidditch, and now here. I don’t understand it.”

“Scarcity heightens demand, Harry,” said George.

“Huh?” Harry had no idea what he was talking about.

“What my brother the pseudo-intellectual means is that you’re rarely seen,” explained Fred. “How long since you’ve been to Diagon Alley?”

Harry said, “Until yesterday, I hadn’t been here since the summer before my third year.”

“Precisely, my famous friend,” George said. “It’s a matter of pent-up demand. Everyone wants to see you; it doesn’t matter whether they think you a hero or a nutter.”

“I’m inclined to the latter, of course,” Fred chimed in.

George said, “I’m more interested in this spanking good knapsack of yours. Where did you find this?”

“It’s part of a birthday present that Sirius left me,” said Harry.

“Goodness, it is your birthday today!” Fred shouted, clapping Harry on the back.

“Let me fetch some butterbeer to celebrate,” George said. “Something to eat, Harry?”

“Eat here? You must be joking!” Harry said.

“Aw, ickle Harrykins doesn’t trust the bad old pranksters,” mocked George.

“How are you supposed to carry that knapsack?” asked Fred. “It’s a bit awkward without a handle.”

Harry said, “It’s not a knapsack; they’re saddlebags.” He decided that there was enough room in the empty centre of the storeroom, and took the tiny motorbike out of the bag. He set it as close to dead centre as he could guess, set his hand over it, and whispered ‘Redintegro Triumph’.

“Merlin!” Fred shrieked.

“Oh, the fun we could have with that...” said George, and a goofy grin spread across his face.

Fred said, “I see endless possibilities for mayhem,” and rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

“Down, boys,” warned Harry.

“Where did Sirius come up with this?” asked George.

Harry told him, “Devlin Whitehorn made it for him. Sirius arranged for Whitehorn to refurbish it for me. It’s actually sort of a big broomstick under there.”

“Devlin Whitehorn?” Fred confirmed.

“The Devlin Whitehorn?” George asked.

“Put his own hands on the most incredible thing that I think I’ve ever seen?” Fred wondered.

“Just for you?” gasped George.

Harry tossed out, “Oh yeah, he signed the brooms for me, too,” as if it were insignificant, knowing full well what he was doing to the twins.

Fred and George looked first at each other with bugging eyes, then at Harry, and then at the wrapped brooms. They lunged for the packages and each tore one open.

Fred held up one of the brooms. "Ron's going to wet himself! I've never seen anything like this – do you think it's an original? Cor! Look at this, George! To Ron: Hope you win back-to-back Quidditch Cups. He's signed and dated it, right here!"

George started cackling. He handed the other broom to Fred and choked for air.

Harry asked, "What's so funny?"

Fred snorted, "You haven't looked it over?"

"No, I haven't," said Harry.

Fred burst out laughing and Harry snatched back his 2100-R. In bold handwriting, in one line along the length of the broomstick, Whitehorn had written:

Dear Harry: Please break this broom over You-Know-Who's arse. I'll gladly give you a new one. Best wishes and happy Seeking, Devlin Whitehorn

Harry sputtered, "I hope Madam Hooch doesn't have a problem with 'arse' written on my broom," and then collapsed in laughter.

When they had all settled, Harry asked, "You think Ron will go for it, then?"

"The broom? If he doesn't, I'll break it over his arse," Fred said.

George shrugged. "He's always had a problem with jealousy. Like I said yesterday, it's the natural outcome of a life of hand-me-downs and put-downs." No it's not, thought Harry, and I should know.

Fred smirked, "Of course, when you mix in the opposite sex – well, it's a potion for disaster."

"What are you talking about?" Harry asked.

Fred frowned. "You're joking, right? George, I think young Harry's trying to pull a prank on us."

George said, "He knows better than that. I think perhaps the lad's simply naïve. Shall we educate him?"

Fred nodded. "He's either naïve or blind. Harry, in case you truly didn't notice last night, our hapless brother thinks he's in love with Hermione. However, he's too big a git to get out of his own way. He also suffers from denial and self-doubt. It's sad, really."

"Quite sad," George agreed. "We tried to help him with his misery last year but he was too stubborn to listen to us."

"He's in... oh. Erm... I see." Harry collected himself, and added, "I mean they've always circled around one another, but he never actually said anything to me."

George watched Harry as if he was the first test of a new product; he slowly broke out into a wicked smile. "Oi, Fred, we have a problem."

Fred gave Harry the same inspection. "Most definitely a problem, George; this is too good! 'My best friend loves my best friend and so do I'... sounds like something right from one of Mum's trashy romance novels, doesn't it?"

Harry stared at the twins coldly. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

George said, "This explains the circus at Gringotts last night, eh?"

Fred gave Harry a mock disapproving look. "Harry, let me break it to you. Ron and Mum will never be truly happy unless Hermione hooks up with Ron and you hook up with Ginny. That way, Mum gets the

son she'd prefer over Ron, and Ron gets the girl and his best mate as a brother-in-law. Don't pretend that you couldn't see it!"

George shook his head. "You're forgetting the spanner in the works, dear brother."

Fred nodded. "Ah yes, that. Hermione doesn't love Ron. Well, not like that, anyway."

Harry's mouth dropped open.

Fred chuckled. "I'll close that for you if you like, Harry. We have it on very good authority – Ginny told us."

"Well, she didn't exactly want to tell us, but we're rather persuasive when we want dirt on our siblings," added George.

Fred's eyes narrowed and bore in on Harry. "Of course, I think dear Ginny might have held out on us if we'd asked her this morning. What do you think, George?"

"This morning, Ginny was a cauldron gone horribly wrong," George observed flatly.

Fred searched Harry's face for a response. "I was thinking you might have something to say about that?" he said.

Harry answered quickly, "I feel badly for her. I know she was embarrassed, but she panicked – she didn't need to blurt out everything in her head!"

"What do you intend to do about it?" George asked calmly.

Harry was becoming apprehensive about the twins' demeanour. "I was considering leaving the country?" he offered, hoping to lighten the mood.

"That's a start," George said. He remained expressionless, and Harry squirmed until Fred started to make faces.

Finally Fred said, "If you hurt her, we'll use you as our personal guinea pig for the next year. Still, old boy, we do see that you're in an awkward pinch."

"You're allowed some latitude, Harry. She can be terribly dramatic," George told him.

"She's a fourteen year old girl, George – of course she's dramatic!" Fred spluttered.

"Just be nice to her," George demanded.

"But not too nice," Fred added.

"No, definitely not too nice. That would be a sure path to product testing," George said.

"So I'm more or less doomed," Harry observed.

Fred nodded. "Until she decides to move on, yes. I don't want to think about Ginny in love – it makes my stomach turn. I'd rather talk about the dirt that we wheedled from her."

"I agree. We certainly thought it was good news," said George.

"Hermione's completely wrong for Ron," Fred said flatly.

"Totally mismatched," agreed George.

"Nothing in common," Fred said.

George continued, "She's too smart for him – she'd be bored with him in a month."

Fred snorted, "She has to be dragged onto a broom, for Merlin's sake!"

“Besides, we have plans for our little brother,” George cackled. “How can we sit idly by, when so many others have lust in their hearts for him?”

“Do you mean Lavender Brown?” Fred asked.

“She’s about Ronnie’s speed,” said George.

“What speed is that – idle? Say, what about Parvati Patil?” Fred wondered.

“The Patils still hate him from the Yule Ball,” George sighed.

“That’s quite a grudge, isn’t it? You don’t suppose Katie...?” Fred said.

George frowned. “Not bloody likely,” he grumbled.

“Who’s that Ravenclaw with the... you know... and the... oh, come on, brother, you certainly know...?” Fred asked; he scratched his head in frustration.

George pursed his lips for a moment, and then offered, “Isn’t it something like broccoli?”

“Bleagh!” Fred groaned. “If you’re going to use food to remember names, pick something less likely to make me spew... hold on there... Brock... Brocklehurst, that’s it!”

Harry’s brows furrowed. “Mandy Brocklehurst? What about her?”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake, Harry! She has those... and that... and to walk behind her on the stairs...” Fred stopped and took a deep breath. “Delectable, positively delectable. Too smart for Ronnie, though.”

“True, true – she’d stir up the same feelings of inadequacy as Hermione does,” George said.

“I’m taking away the Wireless, brother,” Fred said with a smirk. “You’ve been listening to Auntie Agony again, haven’t you? ‘Feelings of inadequacy’... next thing, you’ll be buying skirts and lip gloss!”

“You’re mad, the both of you,” Harry huffed.

“Er... I have to ask a delicate question... you do like girls, right?” George asked.

“Of course I like girls!” snapped Harry.

“ You know, there’s someone else who’s been crushing on Ronniekins? We could set Loony Lovegood on him –” Fred started.

“Don’t call her ‘Loony’. Luna deserves better than that from you two; she deserves better from everyone. Her own house treats her badly enough – don’t you start to trifle with her,” Harry warned both twins.

Fred and George exchanged surprised glances. “Goodness, Harry,” Fred said.

“There are so many layers, aren’t there, Fred?” asked George.

“Layers upon layers, George,” agreed Fred. “Harry is complicated; he’s nothing at all like our dear confused little brother.”

“Enough!” Harry shouted. The twins laughed at him; Fred tried to ruffle his hair.

“So when do we get to ride it?” asked George, ogling the motorbike.

“Ride it? I want to know when we disassemble it,” said Fred hungrily.

Harry stood up, reduced the motorbike, and put it back in his saddlebag. “You guys are too much,” he said. The twins helped repack the 2100-Rs, lashed the cases back together with the handle, and handed them off. Harry reduced them and they joined the bike and another package that the twins gave him.

Lupin was waiting inside the shop; Harry couldn't tell for certain if he was amused or stunned by the spectacle around him. "I see they found you," he called out.

Harry couldn't help but grin. "The bike – it's brilliant!" he said.

Lupin broke into a smile and said, "I'm sure Sirius is very pleased just now."

Harry bade the twins goodbye and walked with Lupin to the Leaky Cauldron. Just short of the front door, Lupin said, "We've a quick errand to run. I had thought that taking the Underground would be for the best, but no one would ever expect... would it be all right if I were to ride pillion?"

"Pillion?" Harry asked.

"Behind you, Harry – would it be all right if I rode behind you on the bike?" explained Lupin.

"Er... are you certain about that?" said Harry nervously. "I was just shown how –"

Lupin waved him off. "If you can fly a Firebolt, you can manage this old thing," he said. Harry took a deep breath and stepped out onto the sidewalk. He stood just inside the anti-Muggle ward and enlarged the bike

Lupin stood stock still for a few moments at the sight of it. "I never expected to see the Bonnie again, you know?" he said quietly.

"If we're going to do this..." said Harry. Lupin summoned two discarded tins from the kerb and transfigured them into fair equivalents of helmets. He prodded Harry to don one of them and strapped the other to his own head. Harry nudged the bike out onto the sidewalk and pushed it by the handlebars onto the street. He tied the saddlebags in place, his cloak and shrunken gifts set inside. He and Lupin clambered on and then they were off into the traffic.

Whitehorn had been right; the motorbike didn't handle like a broom, especially when it was pretending to roll along the roadway. Harry enjoyed the way that the false engine noise escalated with the throttle, and had to admit that the loud rumble heightened the experience of riding. He also found the brakes a bit sensitive. They rode slowly and very carefully. Harry was content to draw horns and gestures rather than a traffic violation; he didn't care to test his licence. No one seemed to suspect that they were riding anything other than a motorbike. In fact, they drew a few admiring waves.

Lupin directed them to Grimmauld Place. It was early afternoon by the time that Harry saw Number 12 appear before him. As soon as his helmet was off, he asked, "Why are we here?"

"We need to take possession of the house now that the will has been read. Professor Flitwick has agreed to cast a new Fidelius tomorrow," Lupin said. "After that, we'll move here for a few days to sort things out... if you're up for it, of course. I realise that what you do is your own business, but if you can remain safe –"

Harry shrugged. "Everything's made sense so far. I can speak up for myself."

Entering the house proved rather simple. Harry held the Black signet ring against a rune adjacent to the front door and tapped a second rune with his wand. There was a flash of light and a tingle in his fingers. Lupin cast against the same runes, with the seal of a parchment replacing the ring. The door opened of its own accord.

The entry wasn't as gloomy as the first time Harry had entered 12 Grimmauld Place, nor was it as tidy as when Mrs. Weasley had been running the household. There was no sign of new infestations, and the results of a few cautiously cast dark detection spells met Lupin's expectations.

Harry made his way to the kitchen and unloaded his saddlebags onto the tabletop. Lupin looked at the broom cases with interest. "I picked up two brooms from Devlin Whitehorn – still can't believe I actually

met him,” Harry said. “Can you believe he autographed them? There’s one for me and one for Ron.”

Lupin gave him a half-smile. “Impressive. Planning to try and make up, eh? Good man.”

“I hope so. I might give Ron this, too,” Harry said, nodding toward a square gold box. “It’s a birthday assortment from Fred and George. I’m a bit afraid to open it.”

“You might want to wait until you’ve settled things with Ron, then. A gift from the twins might offset the broom,” Lupin observed. “By the way, would you please pick up an actual helmet to wear when riding the bike? Sirius dumped it a time or two. He learned the value of helmets the hard way. I’ll ask that you consider having two helmets, in case you’re planning on anyone riding pillion.”

“The way Whitehorn tells it, Sirius needed three helmets,” Harry said.

Lupin blushed. “That was sometimes the case, yes,” he admitted. “I suppose Whitehorn would know. Sirius was close to him when he was working for Nimbus. I see he modified the bike a fair bit. It couldn’t be reduced in size before; that surely would have gotten Sirius out of a fix or two.”

Harry clenched and unclenched his fists and returned to the entry hall. “I wouldn’t know anything about that,” he said in a forced whisper. “Whitehorn had quite a lot to say about Sirius, actually. He said more than anyone else has ever bothered to tell me.” He stormed up the stairs and toward the drawing room.

“I haven’t shared a lot with you, have I, Harry? I haven’t given you very much at all,” Lupin said as he followed Harry, casting dark detection spells all the while.

Harry turned on Lupin. “No, you haven’t,” he snapped. “Wait, let me take that back: I do owe you my Patronus. I’m sure Dumbledore was thrilled about that. Everyone’s all too willing to take an interest in my

skills, aren't they? I'll give Hagrid due credit; at least he gave me the picture album. Even Sirius – I can't believe he worked for Nimbus and never told me. He found the time to tell Ginny about music. He loved books, and I guess he shared that with Hermione. He even knew Ron was obsessed with the Cannons. He waits until he's dead and gone, and then... and then drops all of this on me, and I –" I will not cry, he insisted to himself, I won't give anyone the satisfaction.

"Harry, no one really knows what to say to you. No one ever has," Lupin said sadly.

"You could have said that," Harry growled.

"I told you that I'd make a poor father figure," Lupin said, "and I don't expect to improve much on that score. Nevertheless, I intend to be here for you if you'll allow me."

Harry ignored him. The drawing room was nearly empty, he realised. The cabinets were bare and there was a discoloured area on the wall where the Black family tapestry had hung.

"Harry, please talk to me," Lupin asked calmly.

"Why are you doing all of this, Remus? Is this out of guilt?" Harry demanded.

"No, but in part it is a matter of obligation. Obligation is one of the few noble options left to us," said Lupin. "Guilt is a waste of one's energy. I have an obligation – to you, to Sirius, and to your parents. That's why I'm here, despite your bitterness and mood swings and endless cheek."

"I have good reason to be bitter – you're well aware of that," Harry spat.

Lupin let out a low growl, set his jaw, and thundered, "Do you think you have a monopoly on loss? Don't flatter yourself!"

Harry wasn't sure what he'd set off, but he began to apologise, "I didn't mean to –"

"I'll be thirty-eight years old this fall, Harry," Lupin snarled, "and I'm completely alone. My so-called family won't have me. My friends are all dead. I found love once – surprised, Harry? – and the Death Eaters took that away from me as well. Do you know why no one around you talks about the past? No one cares to remember it! Nearly everyone from the old Order is swimming in loss, but you're too self-absorbed to notice!"

Harry felt the telltale catch in his throat and dabbed at his eyes. He was determined to hold it together in front of Lupin and chose to say nothing.

Lupin picked up on Harry's distress. "Your life has been tragic, Harry, by any measure," he said, now closer to his usual demeanour. "I don't dispute that – nor does anyone who genuinely knows your history – but I'm weary of watching you push away everyone who can help you. You're choosing to push away your life. Can't you see that?"

"People who get close to me die. I need to push them away," Harry insisted.

Lupin said, "You need to give the people close to you a choice in the matter. Sirius and your father took an enormous risk when they befriended me. I was terribly worried, but they made their choices and stuck by them."

"Dumbledore doesn't offer choices, at least where I'm concerned," Harry countered.

Lupin frowned. "I don't share all of Sirius' anger on that count but I do share his concern. Dumbledore hasn't been forthcoming with you and that has been a mistake."

Harry seethed, "I'm fed up with the lies. Dumbledore and Snape must have let Sirius rot in Azkaban, as far as I can tell. Dumbledore told me that Snape was the eavesdropper who heard the prophecy, and

that Snape was there when my parents were killed. How could he not know about Wormtail? If Snape knew, then so did Dumbledore.”

Lupin slowly turned red. “Would you repeat that, please?” he eventually asked in a low and dangerous voice.

“Snape was there when my parents were killed. He had to know about Wormtail, he had to,” Harry told Lupin, “which means that he let Sirius rot, and that Dumbledore let it happen.”

“There has to be an explanation... he couldn’t... no matter how much bad blood... I can’t comprehend... there has to be... Snape!” Lupin spluttered, clenching and unclenching his fists.

“Dumbledore said he would find me tonight,” Harry added. “I’m not letting this go.”

“You will tell me exactly how he explains himself,” Lupin ordered through clenched teeth. “You will spare me no details. Is that clear, Harry? I want to know everything. If Snape was responsible for Sirius being stuck in Azkaban —”

Harry was taken aback by the hatred burning in Lupin’s eyes. “I’ll let you know, I promise,” he agreed. Just then there was a loud squeal, followed by a BOOM! and a symphony of popping and crackling. Harry began to dash through the doorway but Lupin seized him by the shoulder. They crept, wands drawn, to the edge of the stairs, then to the entry, and finally to the kitchen.

Dobby was crouched beside the table, his head covered by his arms. Winky madly clutched at him. The gold box from Fred and George had burst open, and its contents jetted into the room. Twirling colours exploded into bright letters that spelled out ‘Happy Birthday to our Partner’, ‘Welcome to the Family, Future Brother-In-Law’, ‘Harry Loves Devlin Whitehorn’, ‘Happy Birthday, Publicity Hound’ and a half dozen much cruder references. A letter on cream parchment popped out, inviting Harry to an Annual Meeting of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes investors, to be held that evening at their Diagon Alley shop.

It took Harry and Lupin five minutes to quell the explosions, and another half hour to calm Dobby and Winky. Dobby explained that he knew Harry was in a place that needed to be cleaned, so he and Winky had come to do their duty as Harry's servants. Lupin was amused by Harry's attempt at arguing with the house-elves over their status. Immediately they set forth. Within a half hour, the ratty carpeting had been removed to reveal clean but unpolished wooden floors; the remnants of wallpaper had been removed and the walls scrubbed to nearly white; the house-elf heads were banished; and most of the serpent-styled items – door knocker, candelabras and so forth – were nowhere to be seen. Harry and Lupin swept the house for any undiscovered dark items. Kreacher was nowhere to be found; when they made their way back to the kitchen, the deranged house-elf's lair was clean and empty.

"Pumpkin juice and light snacks are prepared for the sirs," Dobby said with a polite bow. Just as at the Lion's Den, a pitcher of juice, two glasses and two plates of small sandwiches and cookies were arranged on the table.

"I hope this is to your liking, Master Harry sir," Winky said.

Harry smiled. "Very much so, Winky. Welcome to Grimmauld Place, I suppose." He thought for a moment, and added, "May I ask something of the both of you?"

"Harry Potter may ask of Winky anything he requires," she said. Dobby nodded his agreement furiously.

"The house is very clean now – thank you, by the way – but didn't Kreacher get in your way? Have you seen him at all?" asked Harry.

Winky hissed and showed a glimpse of pointed and sharp-looking teeth that startled Harry. "Kreacher was a bad elf, Master Harry, sir. A terrible elf – evil. Kreacher led his master to death. Abomination!"

Harry agreed with her – even Kreacher's name raised anger inside of him. Despite that, he asked, "Where is he, then?"

Lupin sat straighter. "Kreacher hasn't managed to leave, has he?" he asked with not a little concern.

Winky's smile completely bared the sharp teeth; she positively dripped malice. "Kreacher is not free. He will not betray the house of Master Harry, sir. He will not betray Master Harry, sir, or friend-of-the-house Mister Lupin." Her eyes narrowed and she added, "Kreacher has earned his reward."

"Dobby and Winky will protect Harry Potter, sir, and his secrets," Dobby added fiercely.

Lupin put his hand on Harry's arm. "No need to press, I think," he said.

Harry looked Winky straight in the eyes, which made the house-elf take a step back. "Thank you for saving me the trouble of dealing with him myself," he said. Winky gave a nervous curtsy; Dobby bowed but crossed his arms in what seemed to be grim satisfaction. Lupin hesitantly took a cookie. Harry nursed his juice and considered how little he actually knew about house-elves.

Lupin encouraged Harry to attend the twins' Annual Meeting throughout the afternoon; he finally confessed that he would be there as well, and that he was uncomfortable with Fred and George's near-worship of him.

Harry decided to ride the Bonnie back to Diagon Alley. Lupin begged off, saying that he needed to check in with Tonks and would meet Harry at the shop. Dobby and Winky twitched at any mentions of Fred and George, and Harry spent his journey across London grumbling to himself about the twins' explosive birthday gift.

Chapter Seven

A LESS-THAN-SHINING PARTY

Harry knew little about actual motorbikes. It was obvious that helmets were required; Lupin had clearly been giving more than just advice. He had no idea where to purchase an actual helmet, so he pulled discreetly into a secluded alleyway not far from Grimmauld Place and transfigured an empty milk jug from an open bin into something that passed for a helmet without a shield. He wasn't sure how long the faux helmet would hold up, so he quickly returned to the roadway.

He quickly discovered that auto drivers weren't merely intolerant of his riding, but of motorbikes in general. A frustrated young driver raced past, cut him off, and then shouted out his open window, "Get over and milk it, scooter scum!"

Harry struggled with the explosion of road signs, and a copy of the Highway Code quickly joined a proper helmet on Harry's mental list of purchases to be made. He decided that the Bonneville's clock didn't work; the number of miles seemed to change randomly, and the indicated speed fluctuated wildly.

A few minutes into the ride, he was nearly found out. Two other motorcyclists pulled alongside at a signalled intersection and gaped at him. One rider managed to splutter, "Bloody amazing balance," before the signal changed. He watched carefully from behind at the next signal, and remembered that he should place at least one foot on the ground when the Bonneville was stopped.

Harry eventually came to a motorway, which was at once better and worse than the urban streets and carriageways. He could make better time and there was less manoeuvring required, but every time an 18-wheeled juggernaut would whip past, the Bonneville vibrated and its shudders shot up his spine. By the time he reached the centre of London, he was tired and cold. He'd worn his new aviator jacket, a shirt and denims, but the wind still tore through him.

He walked briskly through the Leaky Cauldron, so that no one had the chance to acknowledge him. After an impatient passage through

the new security gate, he made his way down the Alley to Number 93. One of the Weasleys – Harry was fairly certain it was Fred – opened the door.

“Come in before someone thinks we’ve reopened,” the twin said briskly.

George emerged from the back room; he was clutching a towel half-covered in thick black goo. “You don’t want to know,” he said to Harry with a grin.

“Lupin should be here soon,” Fred said. “I see you have those amazing leather bags with you, Harry.”

“That means you’re carrying the amazing motorbike, Harry,” George chimed in.

“And that means we’ll have the chance to give it a thorough look-over,” Fred said.

“No disassembling, of course!” said George.

Fred shook his head instantly. “Perish the thought, brother – didn’t mean a word of it this morning.”

“I hope so, brother,” George said, “because I’d rather not have our partner hex us from here to Hogsmeade.”

“Ixnay on the Ogsmeade-Hay, Eorge-Gay...” Fred muttered.

“Eorge-Gay? How dare you address me by that foul name, Sir Knave? I will have satisfaction!” George howled. The twins launched into a loud and mostly harmless duel that Harry watched from the relative safety of the counter. A tap at the door interrupted them. Fred rushed across the sales floor; George strolled behind him.

As soon as Lupin entered, Fred bowed deeply. “Welcome to our humble establishment, Your Grace!” he proclaimed.

George dropped to the floor and groveled at Lupin's feet. "We live to serve you, liege lord!" he said.

"Yes, yes... well... are you the court fools, then?" Lupin returned.

Fred dropped to his knees and begged, "We would hope to be your humble apprentices, Lord Moony... please? Pretty please? Pretty please with potion on it?"

"Merlin help me," Lupin said under his breath.

"Alas, brother, we have our Annual Meeting to attend – remember?" said George.

Fred sprang to his feet. "Of course, of course... to business, as our bankers say. That is, if you're ready to proceed, Your Eminence?"

"Are you planning to do this for the entire evening?" Lupin sighed.

"Absobloodylutely!" George said eagerly.

Lupin's face fell into his hands. "Let's just get on with this, please?" he pleaded.

"It's just the four of us, then?" Harry asked.

"Certainly not!" Fred gasped.

"We have to think of our future investors," explained George. "It wouldn't be fair to expect you to fund all of our expansion."

"Expansion? You've just opened," Harry said suspiciously.

Fred rolled his eyes. "You're missing the bigger view, Harry. Think of the world out there, just waiting for proper pranksters to seize it by the _"

“Goodness, look at the time,” Lupin cut him off. “Obviously the meeting’s not going to be held here, gentlemen, so what comes next?”

George held up the goo-stained towel. “Portkey,” he said.

“I’m not touching that,” Harry said flatly.

“It’s not as if I planned it this way,” protested George. “I should have set it aside first, but... look, I’ll even let you and Lupin have the clean end.”

“Oi, where do you expect me to hold it?” Fred shrieked.

George ignored him. “Do you trust us, Harry?”

Harry crossed his arms and said, “I trust that when you kill me, you won’t mean to do it.”

“Point,” said Fred. “Do you trust that we aren’t going to give you over to Lord Voldemuffin, at least?” Lupin burst into choking laughter.

“Or to Minister Fudge and his bloody hench-hag?” George added.

Fred looked as if he’d swallowed a lemon whole. “Minister... more like Right Honourable Arsemonger, if you ask me,” he grumbled.

“That’s... rather harsh...” Lupin said between coughs.

“You’ve not filed to open a shop on Diagon Alley before, have you?” George said with disgust.

“So shall we take this portkey, or not?” Fred asked.

“If I die tonight, I’ll haunt you both,” said Harry.

“That’s the spirit!” Fred cheered as four hands took hold of the towel.

The spinning stopped, and Harry found himself sprawled on the floor of an empty entryway. The walls were rough-hewn wood but had been freshly whitewashed. The ceiling was dark and low, and the beams were exposed. Stairs led upward from the end of the hall. Instead of a door behind him, there was a hatch in the floor. There were two window frames, but they were boarded shut. Everything had a freshly repaired feel to it, he thought; there was an odd sense of anticipation in the air, as well. He had no idea where he was and he didn't like that at all.

“Up we go, then,” said Fred. Harry followed the twins and Lupin to the stairs. He put his wand at the ready as they climbed, ready to dispel prank hexes.

George turned the corner first, and Fred held Harry back. Harry heard George say loudly, “I call this first Annual Meeting of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes into session! The first item of business is to announce the appointment of our former professor Remus Lupin as the company’s Chairman and Prankster Emeritus. All those in favour signify by saying ‘aye!’” Harry was startled by the thunderous cry of ‘aye’ from above; he wondered if the twins were taking the mickey out of him, or if there were actually dozens of people in the next room.

“Chairman Lupin, would you please take the gavel?” George called out.

Lupin grinned and disappeared into the room above. Harry heard him clear his throat and he began, “Thank you for that vote of confidence, I think.” He heard a number of snickers and could almost make out some voices.

“Moving to the second item of business,” Lupin went on, “the Directors of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes, His... are you certain about this?”

“Stick to the parchment,” George said.

Lupin resumed, “The Directors of Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes – His Infernal Prankness, Alfred the First, and His Eternal

Explosiveness, George the Last – wish to acknowledge their first and most important investor –”

“Without whom none of us would be here –” George cut in.

“I shan’t read this aloud, boys,” Lupin groaned.

George let out a lengthy sigh. Harry heard the crinkling of parchment and the clearing of George’s throat, who then intoned, “Our investor needs no introduction, which is why he’s getting one. He is a Snitch-grabbing, dragon-slaying, maiden-rescuing school champion. He’s a smashing teacher and he’s too generous for his own good. He gave us our start. Ladies, gentlemen, scoundrels and other sorts, I give you a man who will save you even if you don’t deserve it; a two-time winner of Teen Witch Weekly’s ‘Most Shaggable’ Award –”

“GEORGE FABIAN WEASLEY! There is no such thing! I expect an apology to Harry this instant!” Mrs. Weasley shrieked, which ended the twins’ attempt at a surprise.

“Er... Harry Potter, everyone...” squeaked George. Fred nudged Harry around the corner so firmly that he nearly stumbled.

Harry found himself faced by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and all their children save Percy, Hermione and her parents, the Tonkses, most of Dumbledore’s Army, several Order members and a number of Hogwarts faculty waiting for them. At the sight of him, they all shouted, “HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!”

Mrs. Weasley came to him after an earnest round of hugs and handshakes. She stood with her hands on her hips. “Harry Potter,” she said, “I understand that you were left that – that – thing, and have been riding it around London with no escort and no advance warning whatever –”

Harry wrapped her in the sort of hug that grown children reserve for their parents. “I don’t want you to be angry at me,” he said.

Mrs. Weasley shifted from indignance to indulgence. "Harry, I'm not angry with you. I haven't been angry with you at all," she insisted; "It's simply too much to take in, all of it."

Ron stood back a few steps, with a smile fixed on his face that Harry knew was forced. "Happy birthday," he said. "So what's this about a thing?"

Harry couldn't resist the opportunity. "Talking about my thing, are we?" he asked, but couldn't get through it without a snort.

Mrs. Weasley rolled her eyes in long-suffering fashion. "I need to see what sort of havoc Fred and George have planned," she said, and disappeared into the crowd of well-wishers.

"They said this thing was wicked, whatever it is," said Ron. "Let's see it, then?"

"We'll need a bit of room," Harry said. He led Ron to the side of the room, set down his saddlebags, palmed the motorbike and whispered the charm. The sight of the Bonnie drew a collective gasp from most of the people present.

Ron's eyes went wide. He clutched at his right forearm with his left hand. "Get that away from me," he said flatly.

"Ron, what is it? Are you all right?" Harry asked.

"Get it away, I said!" Ron shouted.

Fred and George quickly flanked him. "Where's the fire, Ron?" Fred asked.

"What's the problem?" George chimed in. Ron covered his eyes with his hands and wailed.

Harry quickly reduced the motorbike and thrust it back into one of the bags. "It's put away," he promised; "It's gone now."

Ron was ghastly pale and his hands shook, but he still managed to brush away his mother. George guided him to the stairs, where Madam Pomfrey – one of the many faces Harry hadn't expected to see – descended upon him.

Harry looked to Mrs. Weasley for an indication. "Should I go after him? I don't know what to do," he admitted.

"I hope you'll follow after him, Harry. Perhaps you might get through to him somehow? It's been a very long summer," said Mrs. Weasley.

Harry slipped the shrunken case for Ron's broom from the saddlebags and handed the bags to Fred – with a quick admonishment to leave the motorbike alone – then headed for the stairs through the tight gathering. He made quick greetings but made it obvious that he was moving on. Ginny appeared beside him and politely fended people off.

George stood outside a closed door one flight up. "He shook off Pomfrey and won't tell me a thing," he sighed.

Ginny scowled and rapped loudly on the door. "Ron, Harry's here to talk with you and you won't make excuses!" she snapped. After a few moments of silence, they heard the door unlock.

"I'll be in the next room," said Ginny.

"You don't have to –" Harry started.

"I need a break from all of this," she said. "Help him, would you?"

Harry squeezed her hand in thanks, gave George a respectful nod, and opened the door. One lamp was dimly lit in the corner. As in the other rooms that Harry had seen, the windows were boarded. Ron sat in the corner of the empty room, hugging his knees. He looked blankly at Harry and then turned away. "Come to look at the freak, did you?" he asked bitterly.

“That’s more my line,” Harry said, in a failed attempt to lighten the mood.

“Can’t even have that to myself, eh?” Ron fumed. “We both have to be freaks... great... just effin’ great.”

“I brought you something,” said Harry. He pulled the shrunken broom case from a pocket and returned it to its normal size.

“A gift for poor Ron, so the great Harry Potter can show everyone how generous he is... isn’t that smashing?” Ron snapped.

“Then why wouldn’t I give it to you down there, in front of everyone?” asked Harry.

Ron didn’t answer at first. “So what is it – an apology gift?” he finally asked.

Harry decided that he wouldn’t be baited. “There won’t be any apologies,” he said. “It’s a gift so you remember that we’re mates.”

“It’s a very big package for that,” Ron said.

“What happened to you must have been really horrible. It was my fault entirely; I shouldn’t have been there, and you shouldn’t have been there. That’s what I was trying to say last night before Malfoy showed up,” explained Harry.

Ron’s eyes squeezed tight and Harry could almost feel the pain. “I was there because I wanted to be there, and I’d do it again. I just – Sirius can bloody well sod off, you know? I didn’t need him telling me how to be a friend, or how to choose between friends in a pinch! He had no right to do that, Harry! It was a horrible thing for him to do –”

“You’re right,” Harry cut in.

“And then he... what’d’ya mean, I’m right?” Ron asked.

“You’re right, Ron – Sirius had no business playing games with us,” Harry agreed. “Besides, there was no need for it.”

“Er... I don’t understand...?” Ron said.

Harry pulled the broom case in front of Ron. “There was no need for it,” he repeated. “I’ve known where you stand since we were first-years. You chose to take on that troll. You chose to sacrifice yourself in that game of wizard’s chess. Even when we were fighting, I knew that you’d be there when it counted.”

“I haven’t just resented Sirius,” Ron said. “I’ve resented you too, especially for all the secrets. I know I have a temper, but I can keep a secret, you know? ‘Course, I didn’t really understand it until this summer. Sometime it’s too hard to share; it took this to get it through my head.” He held up his well-covered forearms.

Harry nudged the package. “Open it,” he said. As Ron tore at the coarse paper, he added, “Now listen to me, right? This isn’t about money, or trying to impress you or anyone else – understood?”

Ron whistled as he revealed the well-polished wooden case. “Wow... you’re really trying to make your point, aren’t you? I know what comes in a case like this,” he whispered, his voice cracking.

Harry smiled. “You don’t know the half of it,” he said.

Ron held up the Nimbus 2100-R. “It’s a bloody racing broom,” he said in awe. He traced his hand along the handle and then tested the bristles. Harry stayed silent as Ron set the broom down and ordered it up into his grasp several times. “I know this isn’t about money,” he said without taking his eyes off the broom. “I don’t know why I acted that way last night. I’m just – well, I think it’s clear that I’m not myself.”

“Don’t fret over it,” Harry said.

Ron turned the broom, admiring it from several angles. “This is amazing, mate. What’s the marking there – you didn’t have it detailed,

did you?" Harry took out his wand and quietly cast a light spell. Ron peered at the side of the handle and his jaw dropped.

"He saw you win the Cup, you know?" Harry explained. Ron's eyes widened and his breathing quickened.

"Say something," Harry insisted.

"I don't know..." Ron managed. "When did you –?"

"This morning, when I picked up... the other thing," Harry said.

Ron sighed and shook his head. "After everything last night, you go and ... thank you. That's what I should say." He turned his gaze back to the broom, and whispered, "Thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome. He signed one for me, too," Harry told him.

"What'd he write on yours, then?" Ron asked. Harry recalled it for him, and Ron snorted. When he told Ron what he'd said to the twins about Madam Hooch, Ron burst out laughing. They sat and regaled each other with Hogwarts memories and Quidditch stories for a long time, and Harry felt a glimmer of old times.

"You can talk to me about anything – like what happened downstairs... when you're ready for it," Harry offered.

Ron cast his eyes down. "Right, just as soon as you tell me why you needed to disappear this summer, and I don't mean that rubbish about darkness and what-not."

"We'll be talking soon, then," Harry promised. "I'm almost ready."

Ron said, surprised, "Seriously? Well, when that happens, I'll return the favour – I promise you. It's just... it feels like nothing will ever be right again if I do."

"Now that's something I understand," Harry said knowingly.

Ron flashed a smile that Harry believed. "So there's this bash going on just down the stairs, and here I sit hiding in the dark with the guest of honour. Let's eat!" He stood, clutching the racing broom. "Actually, I can't pass on the opportunity to gloat about this! Bloody hell!"

Harry sighed, "I don't mind sitting here a bit longer, honestly. I wasn't prepared for all of this."

Ron smiled. "Fred and George really got you, eh? You should know better."

"All these people, on practically no notice – can you blame me for being a little surprised?" Harry asked.

"Well, it wasn't all for your birthday. I mean, we're also celebrating the Weasley's good fortune. We just boarded Ginny's party train, that's all," Ron smirked.

Harry frowned. "Ginny's responsible for this, after what happened last night? Maybe I should have a talk with her..."

Ron broke out into a satisfied grin. "What," he asked, "you're going to face my little sister's hopeless infatuation at last?"

"I thought she was tight with Dean Thomas," Harry said.

Ron laughed. "That was for my benefit. I think she actually thought I bought it for a week or two. I was pretty hard on her over Michael Corner so she wanted me off of her."

Harry was caught off-guard. "She's not over the crush?"

The grin on Ron's face spread from ear to ear. "She sure went to a lot of effort last year convincing herself. Guess it didn't take, eh?"

"There's no need to be smug," Harry complained.

Ron switched to a mock-frown. "Harry, I'm disappointed. A simple acceptance of your fate is all I ask."

“Ron!” Harry warned.

“All right, all right,” Ron said, returning to an easy smile. “I didn’t expect that the idea would make you squirm?”

“I’m not sure we should be having this conversation,” Harry grumbled.

“Why not?”

“Because she’s your sister, for Merlin’s sake!” Harry thundered. “If I say I like her, you’ll want to give me a thumping. If I say I don’t like her, you’ll want to give me a thumping. I can’t win here!”

Ron crossed his arms. “I had hoped we were making a fresh start here – you know, less secrecy and more honesty?”

Harry cringed. “Could we start tomorrow?”

“Spill!” Ron demanded.

Harry laughed. “You are going to thump me no matter what!” Ron waved his new broom at Harry menacingly. He started to say something, but heard a sound – an enticing sound – and stopped.

“Had enough, have you?” Ron taunted. “There’s more where that came from, birthday boy!”

“Shh,” Harry said. “What is that?” When Ron continued to appear blank, he added, “That sound, Ron. What is it?”

“What, that groaning? It’s Ginny with that bloody violin again, that’s what it is,” Ron pouted. “She won’t put it down for five minutes, I tell you. Big party, lots of guests, her idea, and she brings that thing with her so she can hide out!”

“Groaning? It sounds good to me,” Harry said.

“Makes my teeth rattle,” Ron grouched. “Let’s get her to knock off, and head down.”

Ron opened the door and quickly strode to Ginny’s door, Nimbus 2100-R in hand. He pounded with his fist, and said loudly, “Enough of that racket – let’s eat!”

Ginny called out, “Are there survivors? I hear one, at least.”

“We’re fine, Ginny,” Harry said. “You don’t have to stop on our account.”

Ron’s grin came back in full force, as he tore open Ginny’s door. “Put that blasted thing away, Ginny... Oh! We were just talking about you,” he announced. Harry felt his cheeks warm.

Ginny smiled. “You’re all square, then?” she asked.

Ron nodded. “Absolutely! Get a load of the fig leaf he brought to patch things up,” he said, holding up the broom.

“I hope you mean the olive branch he brought,” she sniggered.

“Yeah, whatever – check it out!” Ron exclaimed, and held out the broom.

Ginny carefully tucked the Black family violin into its case. She reached for the broom, held it high, squinted one eye, and sighted down the handle with the other. “Unbelievable,” she said in awe.

“Read the handle,” Ron insisted.

Ginny lowered the 2100-R, and turned toward the light from the stairwell. “To Ron, hope you win’ ... Merlin! How did you – I mean, he doesn’t – not ever, I thought.” She handed the broom back to Ron, and smiled her curious smile at Harry. “You’re something else, Harry Potter,” she said, standing too close to him.

“There you are,” George said through Ginny’s open door.

Fred announced, “Ginny, look what some poor deluded owl brought you this morning.” He waved a paper in the air.

“That’s isn’t the Prophet...?” Harry gasped.

Fred indulged an evil grin. “No, no, it’s even better.”

“That’s mine!” Ginny ordered as she tried to seize the paper from Fred, who quickly darted away.

George told Fred, “Put an end to the suspense – it’s just too good.”

Ron asked Harry, “What about the Prophet?”

Harry moaned, “I was on the front page yesterday. I was sort of mobbed at Gringotts and someone took photos. It was embarrassing.”

“How do you get ‘sort of mobbed’?” Ron asked crossly.

“Give it over!” Ginny bellowed, and snatched the paper roughly from Fred. She glanced at the front page, and then threw it at George.

“Easy, sis,” George said. He caught the paper and waved it at Harry. “We could have sprung this on you downstairs, you know?”

Fred blocked Ginny from leaving the room. “Let me out of this room now – there’s a party to manage,” Ginny insisted in a cracking voice. Her cheeks burned red.

“What is it, Witch Weekly?” Harry asked.

“No, my naïve and poorly-read friend. It’s Teen Witch Weekly. To put it mildly: you’re done for,” Fred informed him.

Ron stole the paper from Harry. “Let me see that ... Merlin! Will you look at this?” Nearly the entire front page of the tabloid consisted of a

single picture with a headline blasted across it. The picture was a slightly grainy shot of Harry, in sleeveless boxing singlet and denims, as he prepared to fly Roger Davies' sister on the racing broom at Diagon Alley. At the top of the page right below the masthead, a small heading said:

Stop the presses... it's...

Across the bottom half of the page, in the biggest letters Harry could possibly imagine, the headline read:

... A HOTTER HARRY POTTER!!

Harry's stomach roiled. He scanned Ron's room for a waste can, a bucket, a bowl, something – anything to use when he spewed up. Ron calmly looked over the picture, and then opened the tabloid.

“Let's see ... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten. Ten pages, Harry. That has to be a record of some kind, wouldn't you think?” Ron smirked. “Someone must be stalking you to get all these pictures... Fred! Did you have anything to do with this?”

Fred held up his hands, palms forward. “I'm innocent. It's not often I can say that, by the way.”

“Well, you're not guilty at any rate,” George snorted.

Ron suddenly smiled. “Look at this,” he said, jabbing Harry with his elbow. “Two pages of Harry Potter at Hogwarts... and here we are – my name's included for once. ‘Harry celebrates with close friend Ron Weasley, shortly after Weasley and the Gryffindor Quidditch team took the House Cup.’ I'll be switched – here I am again... and again!”

Harry forced a smile in return. “That's a good picture,” he managed. “I'd like a copy of that.”

Fred frowned. “You're all missing the smashing part!” he moaned. “Go to page nine, for Merlin's sake!”

Ron flipped the pages. "Page nine... oh, no. Harry, you won't like this..."

Harry ripped the paper from Ron's hands. A vertical box took up half the page, with the heading: Harry's Love Life. His shoulders slumped. From the corner of his eye, he saw that Ginny was crouched in the corner of the room.

Fred picked up the paper, and started reading aloud. " 'Right now, there's one question on the mind of every teen witch: is Harry Potter available? Harry's not talking, of course, and his Hogwarts mates have remained silent on the subject. He spends his summers with Muggles in the company of relatives. If Harry's found love, TWW puts its wager on Hogwarts as the source. Some of the likely candidates include'... There's a small bit here on Harry's 'long-time gal pal' Hermione Granger – it's not the best photo of her... or there's the, uh, 'former girlfriend' Cho Chang... oh, it could be the 'enigmatic and misunderstood' Luna Lovegood... how they came up with Lisa Turpin and Gretchen Hargrove, I can't figure... Daphne Greengrass? They've got to be kidding! I mean, vavoom – but she's Slytherin and cold as ice. Ahh, here we are. How could we overlook little Ginny Weasley?"

"Fred, stow it," Ron said dangerously.

Fred ploughed on. "Let's see... this photo's actually quite good. It says here, 'The spunky sister of Harry's best mate and a close friend of Granger, Weasley's also a brilliant Quidditch player – surely the quickest path to a Seeker's heart.' "

George stole the paper from Fred. "That's enough, brother."

Fred said, "Aw, but it's so cute! You just have to –" He stopped, having at last noticed his sister's quiet sobs. Harry barely kept a terrible wave of anger under control; he dimly realised just how terrible when Fred looked him in the eye and promptly took two steps backward.

"When I find out who is responsible for this..." Harry began darkly.

“Ginny will get howlers for weeks,” Ron said sadly. He glared at his brothers. “What were you thinking, rubbing her nose in this?”

Harry scowled. “All of them are linked to me now. These idiots haven’t a clue how dangerous that is!”

Ron stared into thin air for a moment before recognition set in. “If a Death Eater sees this...?” he began. Fred and George looked at each other, and then at Harry.

Harry said to Ron, “Take this down to your father, or to Dumbledore if he happens to be about.”

Ron nodded. “I’m on it.” He rushed down the stairs, paper in hand.

Harry turned on Fred and George. “You two – get out. Ginny and I need to talk.”

George asked meekly, “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Perhaps we should stay?”

Harry glared at both of the twins, but particularly Fred. “I think you’ve done quite enough already. Get out.”

The twins walked out of the room, and hesitated at the top of the stairs. Harry slammed the door, and shouted through it, “I’d better not catch an Extendable Ear, either. Think about what I can do in return – I know that I will.” He cast silencing charms on the door, all four walls, the floor and the ceiling.

Ginny remained crouched in the corner of the room. Harry knelt down beside her, and she muttered something that he couldn’t make out.

“What was that?” he asked.

“I – said – that I feel – so – stupid,” she managed between hesitant breaths.

“I could understand angry, but why do you feel stupid?” Harry asked, settling down onto the floor.

Ginny rubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand, and her voice quavered. “Goodness, why would I feel stupid? I made a complete arse of myself last night... I turn into a blubbering wreck tonight... stupid, stupid, stupid!”

“I feel badly about last night,” Harry said. “You didn’t have to be quite so honest to avoid the hex.”

She let out a half-chuckle. “Then I cursed the stupid git, and get hexed anyway. I can’t seem to get anything right this summer.”

Harry tried to change the subject. “I heard you playing the violin. Where did you learn to do that?” he asked her.

Ginny took a deep breath that seemed to settle her. Her eyes drifted closed and she managed a pained smile. “I heard him playing, up in the attic. He told me that it was to soothe Buckbeak. He was quite good – did you know that? After that, I would steal upstairs for a little while every day just to listen. Then he asked me to try it. I used to think I was musical, but I knew nothing would ever come of it. It just, I don’t know – it just came out of me from somewhere. He said I was born to play the violin – that it responded to me. I told him that it wasn’t bloody likely I’d ever be playing again, seeing as musical instruments are expensive. I guess that’s why he gave it to me. I admit it – I’m hooked. It almost makes up for what he put me through – almost.”

“You never gave me an opportunity to say anything – you know, about last night?” Harry offered.

Ginny pulled away from him. “You’re Harry Potter,” she continued, “and there are thousands of witches chasing after you. You know what I am... I’m a Weasley; I’m nothing.”

“That’s ridiculous. Your family –” Harry began.

Ginny cut him off tersely. "Ten pages in Teen Witch Weekly, Harry. It wouldn't be the first time, either."

"Where do they get this stuff, anyway? No one's ever talked to me," Harry fumed.

Ginny shrugged. "I suppose they don't think it's necessary. They're just telling people what they want to hear."

"Why do you subscribe, then, if it's such a rag?" Harry asked.

Ginny rubbed at her eyes again, and then the corners of her mouth twitched upward mischievously. "To see whether Malfoy tops the Hot Ten List, of course."

Harry snorted, and then started to laugh. "Malfoy... bleagh! I don't want to know any more about this List," he managed between snorts.

Ginny's grin faded. "No... no, I don't think you do," she decided.

"I'm not letting you off the hook, right?" Harry said. "The only reason anyone knows my name is because of something I didn't mean to do. I'm no different than you, really. Why do you think that you're nothing – that your family's nothing? It's not true, of course."

Ginny looked away. "I shouldn't have to explain it to you. You know me."

Harry hesitated, unsure what to say. "Erm... I don't know you as well as all that. It seems like you confide in with Hermione, but you and me... we haven't talked much, not really. You used to have a bit of trouble with that, remember – talking around me, I mean."

Ginny grimaced. "Don't remind me." She drew herself up, and locked eyes with him. "Fine, I suppose I'm an acquaintance to you. I thought we made up ground last year, even though you weren't exactly sociable. I suppose I just slipped your mind –"

"Ginny..." Harry chided.

“Just look at me, then. You should be able to see the reasons for yourself,” Ginny said flatly.

“Is this about what you said last night? Look, I think your ears are just fine, and I don’t think your nose is pointy at all,” Harry insisted. “Now Ron... he has a pointy nose.”

Ginny buried her face in her hands. “You remember exactly what I said, don’t you?” she groaned.

“This idea that you’re nothing – it’s rubbish,” Harry said firmly. “You’re not just an acquaintance, either. You were a good friend last year. I mean, you came to the Ministry... you’re important to me, Ginny.”

“Not as important as her,” Ginny said.

“That’s not entirely fair,” Harry said. “Hermione and I have known each other since our first train ride to Hogwarts. We’ve been through so much together. I just don’t know you the way I know her. Maybe over time –”

“I didn’t even say her name and you knew who I meant, Harry,” Ginny said. “You’re in love with her, aren’t you?”

“That’s not true. Hermione and I are friends,” Harry said flatly.

“You’re in love with her,” Ginny declared.

“We’re friends, and I would never do anything that might interfere with that,” Harry declared.

“Just admit it,” Ginny demanded.

Harry said, “I can’t love anyone.” His voice cracked, and he felt embarrassed.

“Why not?” Ginny said.

Harry sighed. “When I love people, they die.”

“That’s not true, not always,” Ginny insisted.

“You know it is,” Harry said. “You’ve seen enough to know.”

Ginny closed her eyes. “I didn’t die in the Chamber, Harry.”

“No you didn’t, thank Merlin,” Harry agreed.

Ginny took his hand, and they sat there quietly for a long time. With no warning, she said, “Kiss me.”

“Pardon?” gasped Harry.

“I said, 'kiss me',” Ginny repeated. “You remembered what I said last night, so you must remember the part about making my stomach fly in loops. I just... I need to know.”

“You need to know...?” Harry asked.

“I need to know where we stand,” she said. “Are you going to kiss me, or what?”

Harry thought that the room suddenly felt very, very small. “Erm... uh...”

Ginny sighed. “Oh, for Merlin’s sake – fine, then,” she said. She darted forward and kissed him full on the lips.

For a moment, Harry felt like everything was slowed. Then his senses were assaulted. He felt the wetness and softness of her lips, took in their taste. He felt her breathing quicken, and her lips tremble – or were those his trembling?

She broke off the kiss, and he kissed her in return; he hoped that it would tell her whatever she needed to know. When he pulled away,

she just sat there with her eyes closed. Harry felt like this went on for something close to forever.

She opened her eyes, and said, "That was nice – very, very nice."

He looked around, puzzled and uncertain how to respond; at length, he settled on, "I thought so too."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"For what?"

Ginny sighed. "For letting me know where we stand. I don't think you're the one... at least I'm not certain if you are."

Harry goggled at her. "Wha...?"

She shook her head. "I don't think you're the one, at least not right now. It was nice... lovely, even. Much nicer than Michael Corner; he was like kissing the Giant Squid –"

"I didn't need to know that!" Harry spluttered.

Ginny pressed on, " – but that's not good enough, not from you."

"Erm – I could try again?" Harry offered.

Ginny shook her head. "I'm not getting tangled up with you or your type unless I'm thoroughly swept off my feet; that's how it's supposed to be," she said.

"What do you mean, 'my type'?" Harry asked; he was beginning to feel a bit annoyed.

"The serious type, Harry," Ginny explained. "You're the 'bring-him-home-to-Mum' type. Those stupid witches who burble over you in Teen Witch Weekly have no idea whatever about who you really are. Don't misunderstand – there's not necessarily anything wrong with being the serious sort."

“I can be fun,” Harry protested.

“I didn’t say that you aren’t fun,” Ginny explained; “I just can’t imagine you being casual with a girl. You don’t do anything casually, other than joke with my brothers. Tell me honestly, do you think you could snog a girl senseless if you just liked her – you know, if you weren’t in love?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it,” Harry fumed.

“The answer is ‘no’, and you just proved it to me.” Ginny abruptly smiled at him. It wasn’t the curious smile from the evening prior – it was excitable and a bit off, he thought. He decided that he much preferred the curious smile.

Harry asked, “If I tell you something, will you promise not to laugh?”

The smile quickly faded from Ginny’s face. “Of course I promise.”

“Well – er, it’s just that – ahem – you see... that was my first real kiss,” Harry stammered.

Ginny stared at him. “What’s this?”

Harry still stammered. “That was – erm – my first real kiss. I mean, uh... Cho hardly counts. There was – well – there was no comparison.”

She said testily, “There’s something for my journal: half the witches in Europe are brushing up on entrancements and love potions, and I’m your first kiss.”

“There’s no need to mock me,” Harry snapped.

“I’m not mocking,” Ginny said. “Can I offer you some advice?”

“What for?” he asked.

“Because you’re thick and you need advice,” she answered. “If you plan to do anything about Hermione, do it tonight. I think ickle Ronniekins is planning to make an arse of himself.”

Harry sighed and looked away. “I hope you’re planning to let that go.”

Ginny stood up, and brushed dust from her denims. “I need to let a lot of things go,” she muttered.

Harry said, “I’m sorry?”

“Never mind,” Ginny snapped. “We should go downstairs. It’s not good form to miss your own party.”

Harry ended the silencing charms and Ginny abruptly slammed open the door. She nearly sent Fred and George flying.

“Coming?” she asked.

“In a minute,” Harry said. “Erm... thanks for the advice.” Ginny grunted something and headed down the stairs.

“Ahem – ‘advice’, was it?” Fred asked, nudging George with his elbow.

“Never heard it called that before,” George admitted.

The twins turned toward the stairs as one, calling out, “Oh, Ginny...?”

Harry let out a slow breath. He thought through everything he’d just said or done, and thought through it again until he decided that he was thinking far too much. Why did I kiss her in return? he wondered.

Ron darted back into Ginny’s room, breathing hard. “Dad took a look at the list,” he panted. “The Turpins are pure, apparently. It goes without saying for the Greengrasses, of course. The Hargroves are like your parents – one was Muggle-born – and so are the Changs. Hermione’s the only Muggle-born on the list.”

“What about Luna?” Harry asked.

“Her dad’s a wizard and so was her mum, so she’s not Muggle-born. I guess Dad doesn’t know their family’s history beyond that,” Ron admitted.

“Thanks for talking to your dad,” Harry said, sighing. “It shouldn’t be necessary, though. Why does everyone around me get hurt?”

Ron hesitated before recognizing the implication. “What – you mean us? It’s a bit late for worries, mate. Like it or not this family’s dripping with Harry Potter, excepting Percy – the git. Oi, speaking of you and the family, Fred and George are tossing Ginny like a Quaffle down there. So...?”

“So - what?” Harry responded, cringing.

“Do I have to smack you with my broom?” Ron threatened. “I hate to do it with such an excellent broom, but if it has to be done...”

“Enough!” Harry moaned. “I tried to calm her down after the thrashing she took from Fred, right? Then she kissed me –”

“What?”

“– and I kissed her back, and I think she’s over me now, but I’m not really sure,” Harry finished.

Ron gaped at Harry. “I don’t – wha...?” he started, before burying his face in his hands. “Let me see if I’m getting this,” he muttered through his fingers, “she kissed you, you kissed her, and she’s over you? If that’s what you said, then I’m not getting it.”

“You’ve got it right – and thank Merlin I’m done with that,” Harry said.

Ron dropped his hands. “Hold up there – that’s my sister you’re talking about!”

Harry wagged his finger at Ron. "See, I told you! If I like her, you're stirred up. If I don't like her that way, you're stirred up!"

Ron frowned. "So she's over you, eh? You must be a pathetic snogger."

"Ron!"

"What was it?" Ron demanded. "Did you do something awful to her? I mean, no one goes from a crush like hers to 'over you' that fast – not without a push."

"Ron, I would never do anything awful to Ginny," Harry insisted. "She's a wonderful girl – and I mean that – but I'm not what she wants."

Ron eyed him suspiciously. "She doesn't want you, she's over you. What do you want?"

Harry frowned. "I'm sorry, Ron. I...I guess I tried, you know, when I kissed her back. I didn't think anything was there – not really – and now...?"

Ron appeared stung. "I see. Well...well, I see... as long as you didn't hurt her... I suppose..." he stammered.

"We should head down," Harry offered. "Maybe we can distract Fred and George?"

Ron drew himself up in very Percy-like fashion. "Yes – well – I do suppose that would be the right thing. They oughtn't to hound her like that."

Ginny scrambled away from Fred and George, bumping into people as she moved around the crowded room. She went back and forth between apologies to bystanders and shouts at her brothers. It was a measure of the size of the gathering that the three Weasleys weren't the centre of attention.

Ron implored Harry, "What are you waiting for? Put a stop to this!" Harry strode into the crowd and was steps from George when Ginny careened into Neville Longbottom. Neville broke her fall and scowled at Fred and George.

"Haven't you had enough?" Neville asked them.

George smirked, "Only when we find out what we want to know."

"Look here," Neville said, moving between Ginny and the twins, "you've been round and round five times – that's right, I've been listening – and Ginny's had one answer for you. Give it a rest!"

"Neville, don't get in the middle of official Weasley business," Fred growled.

"You know that we don't play fair," George said with a frown.

Neville walked straight at Fred until they were almost nose-to-nose. "B-bugger off, you" he said. Ginny started to chuckle but stifled it with her hand.

George smiled. "Could this be the timid young thing we used to victimise?"

Fred shook his head vigorously from side to side. "No, this can't be our ickle Neville-poo. This fellow's more bulldog than, say, canary."

George peered closely at Neville. "Say, those aren't feathers popping out there?"

Fred feigned horror. "Neville, you didn't sample anything from those trays of snacks... did you?"

Neville stood firm. "I said, 'bugger off'."

Ginny took him by the arm. "I think they've had enough," she said, and led Neville toward the other side of the room. She stuck out her tongue at the twins on the way.

“Looks as if my work is done,” Harry said to Ron. He fled before the twins could set after him. His path to the kitchen was blocked by a pack of schoolmates.

“Happy birthday, Harry!” Dean Thomas said, pumping Harry’s hand. “I can’t believe they declared you an adult – that’s... well, that’s so cool!”

“Thanks, Dean, nice of you to come,” Harry managed. “Seen Seamus this summer?”

Dean frowned. “His mum packed him off to his aunt in Canada for the summer. I’ll be a bit surprised to see him back.”

“That’s strange. It’s not as if he’s Muggle-born,” Harry said.

“Consider his mum,” Dean pointed out with a shrug. Harry nodded; Mrs. Finnigan had nearly pulled Seamus from Hogwarts the year before.

“Hello, Harry,” Parvati Patil cooed. “I like your hair that way. It makes you look so mature.” Lavender Brown nodded in agreement. Parvati had a strange look in her eyes and a curious smile on her face; Harry moved on quickly. He thought of the look in Parvati’s eyes, and then thought of the Imperius Curse; he quickly scanned the area for Order members, and cursed himself for jumping immediately to suspicion. He was still reeling when he nearly trod over Ernie Macmillan.

“Happy birthday, old man,” Ernie said brightly. “Bit scruffy but looking well, eh?”

Harry ran his hands through his hair. “A bit uncombed, I imagine.”

“That was quite a contraption you had there,” Ernie said. He leaned in, and added in a conspiratorial whisper, “I imagine you could get in trouble with an enchanted Muggle artefact like that.”

Harry returned a wicked grin and whispered, "Special permit. You know how it is... gratitude for services rendered – that sort of thing."

Ernie said, "Ah, yes – of course," and nodded knowingly.

"Hello, Harry. Happy birthday!" Colin Creevey gushed.

"Happy birthday, Harry!" his brother Dennis added.

Harry frowned. He put one arm around the shoulders of each brother, and led them toward the doorway to an adjacent room, which turned out to be a kitchen with a large hearth. "Boys, we need to talk," he said calmly.

"Sure, Harry. What can we do for you?" Colin asked.

"What is it, Harry?" asked Dennis.

As soon as they were clear of the crowd, Harry let go of them and whirled around. "Which one of you is responsible for all the photos of me popping up lately?"

"W-what photos would those be?" Colin asked nervously.

"Oh! He must mean the Teen Witch Weekly bit!" Dennis said. "They must use really smashing paper to be so –"

Colin cut him off. "Dennis, I don't think Harry's interested in –"

Harry in turn cut off Colin. "Harry's very bloody interested when ten-page articles turn up in Teen Witch Weekly," he snarled.

"I told you he'd be displeased," Colin said to Dennis.

"You thought it would be flattering," Dennis insisted.

"What about the Daily Prophet yesterday?" Harry demanded.

Dennis shrugged. "Dunno," he said, "there must have been a staff photographer at Gringotts by accident."

Harry trembled and his voice quaked as he asked, "Did either of you read it?"

The Creevey brothers instinctively moved backward. "Teen Witch Weekly? Erm – most of it," Colin admitted.

"Come off it, Colin; you gave the sign-off," Dennis said.

"Are you responsible for the portion on my love life?" Harry seethed.

Dennis shook his head. "They cook up that stuff on their own – the editor said it keeps the readers' interest. Besides, you know that we take better photos than that."

"You're both very lucky," Harry told them. He felt his jaw twitching. "If you were responsible for that part, I'd hex you into next Christmas! Think on it! How dangerous do you suppose it is for a girl to be connected with me that way?"

Both Creeveys looked at Harry blankly. Harry loomed over them menacingly. "Don't you think that Death Eaters can read?" he asked in an icy voice.

Colin's eyes bulged. "Oh, bugger! I never gave any thought to... oh! Harry, I'm so sorry. I mean, really sorry!" Dennis' face slumped down to his chest, and he shook his head balefully.

"I expect you'll clear these sort of things with me in the future," Harry ordered. He walked back into the larger room and conjured a rough-looking bench in one corner.

Ron was regaling anyone who would listen with an increasingly exaggerated version of Gryffindor's most recent House Cup victory. Ginny sat on the floor between Neville and Lavender Brown, and egged Ron on. Harry grinned at each version, pleased to see a flash of the Ron that he knew and relieved to see that Ginny seemed all

right. It was almost enough to push aside the dark thoughts – until Harry started to think about why the Weasleys were celebrating their good fortune, and why he was free to ride the Bonneville in the first place, and why he felt so empty.

“Hullo, Harry. Happy birthday.” The familiar gruff voice brought Harry out of his thoughts. He found himself almost eye-to-eye with Rubeus Hagrid, who had sprawled on the floor beside the bench.

“Thanks, Hagrid,” Harry said mechanically.

“I, er, brought yeh a little gift,” Hagrid told him, as he fished through the pockets of his overcoat. “Don’ worry, it can’t bite and it don’ need feeding. Here.” He held out a roughly wrapped box. Harry tore at the paper, and gingerly opened the box. Inside was a pair of fitted dragon-hide gloves.

“Thought yeh might like ter have those when yer ridin’ the Bonnie,” Hagrid explained.

Harry’s brow furrowed. “How – you weren’t here when I – were you?”

Hagrid smiled, his dark eyes almost disappearing. “Fraid I missed tha’ part. She’d bin hiding under the cottage for years. When Sirius tol’ me what he had in mind I was happy about it, ter tell yeh the truth. ‘Course yeh shouldn’t be tellin’ that ta McGonagall or Dumbledore. They’re both right angry wit’ yeh.”

Harry didn’t want to hurt Hagrid, and knew he’d do exactly that if he betrayed his feelings toward Dumbledore. He chose to avoid eye contact. “What about you?” he asked.

“Angry wit’ yeh, Harry? I don’ think so. Bit sad, really,” Hagrid answered.

“Sad? About what?”

Hagrid sighed. “ ‘Bout Sirius doin’ wha’ he did, yeh know – the will an’ all? ‘Bout yeh bein’ drawn into all this so young. ‘Bout wha’s comin’, Harry.” Harry said nothing, just stared intently at his own feet.

“Righ’ then,” Hagrid said quietly. He shuffled to his feet, careful not to strike the ceiling with his head, and started to move away.

“Hagrid?”

Hagrid turned and looked at Harry expectantly. “You – er – needin’ ter say somethin’, are yeh?”

Harry said, “I miss him. I miss him, and I don’t know what to do about it. It’s tearing me apart.”

Hagrid drew close, and asked, “Talk ter someone. Tha’s all yer can do.”

“I can’t,” Harry groaned, “it’s too dangerous.”

“Naw, Harry; keepin’ all this inside yer belly’s no good. Talk ter someone. Give Ron a go,” Hagrid said.

“I think he’s had enough for now,” Harry decided.

“How ‘bout Ginny?” Hagrid suggested, “Fond of yeh, but yeh must know tha’.”

“I can’t do it, I can’t,” Harry said distantly, “She’s in enough danger because of me. I just can’t.”

“She don’ look in danger to me,” Hagrid said, pointing toward Ginny and Neville. He pulled on the end of his beard for a few moments, before he said knowingly, “Ah, yer talkin’ about Hermione. Should have seen tha’ comin’. Harry, she can handle ‘bout anythin’ yeh can dish out; give ‘er credit fer tha’.”

“You might not think so, if you knew what I had to say,” Harry said, a lump slowly forming in his throat. “I want to tell her everything, Hagrid, but she’s – she’s safer not knowing.”

“Wha’d’yeh think she’ll do if she don’ know somethin’ important an’ finds out later from somebody besides yeh?” Hagrid asked. “Best yeh think on tha’ before it happens, Harry.”

“She can be as cross with me as she likes, provided she’s alive. Thanks for the gloves, Hagrid,” Harry said.

“Hermione!” Ron shouted. Harry whirled around; he had nearly forgotten that she was present, amidst all the commotion. She and her parents had just reentered the room along with Shacklebolt and Bill Weasley. By the time Harry crossed to the stairs, Ron had already led Hermione away.

“Sorry, Harry,” Ginny said as Harry approached. “I’d hoped you would get to her before Ron.”

Harry snapped, “Why does this seem like some kind of game, where I don’t know the rules?”

Ginny’s eyes narrowed. “Pardon me?”

“What are you playing at?” Harry said. “You’ve gone from snogging me to being over me to tossing me at Hermione in less than half an hour.”

Ginny frowned. “That wasn’t snogging – it was one kiss,” she said. “I needed to know where you stood; you were loud and clear, thank you.”

“Loud and clear? I didn’t say a word,” Harry insisted.

Ginny snorted. “You kissed me like I’m your sister. It’s not as though I was left with doubts.”

Harry lowered his head. "I didn't want to hurt you – I mean, I hope I didn't manage to –"

Ginny laughed; the laughter was raw and edgy. "I'm not hurt – I'm glad for it. It should have happened sooner, if I'd had the courage! I'm free," she said loudly. Harry was acutely aware of being watched by Hermione's mother and a gaggle of Hogwarts schoolmates.

"Ginny, I'm really sorry," Harry said quietly.

"Stop being sorry, right? There's nothing to be sorry about! You've had my advice – talk to Hermione if Ron ever takes his mitts off her. No one should waste as much time pining away as I have!" Ginny told him. Harry was sure that she was shouting. To make matters worse, he spotted Mrs. Weasley standing near the door to the kitchen.

"I'll be going now," he croaked.

"You do that," Ginny boomed. "Go and get over each other, for goodness' sake!"

Harry scooted away. His schoolmates gawked at him whilst attempting to appear casual. Neville's eyes shone with pity, a sure sign that the situation couldn't worsen. He was wrong. Mrs. Weasley's hands were on her hips, and Mrs. Granger wore a predatory expression. Don't show fear, he thought.

Before Mrs. Granger could get in a word, Mrs. Weasley said calmly, "Cordelia, I need a word with Harry. Would you excuse us?"

Mrs. Granger managed a strained smile. "Harry, I trust you'll make time for me as well? I believe we have a conversation to finish."

"Yes, ma'am," he squeaked as Mrs. Granger drifted away.

Mrs. Weasley's eyes bored through him. "Well?"

Harry hesitated. "I'm sorry –"

“I heard that much. Would you care to explain the rest?” As he watched her hands on hips and tapping foot, Harry fought the urge to squirm.

“I’m not clear on what needs explaining,” he offered, as he struggled with an impulse to cringe.

“Who is pining for whom, exactly?” she asked firmly.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “Ginny seems to think I’m pining for Hermione.”

“I take it that you’re not pining for Ginny,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“No, ma’am,” Harry said as he stared at his shoes, “and she doesn’t doubt that.”

“Fred and George were running about like fools, chasing after Ginny’s story,” Mrs. Weasley said. “Let’s come to the point – tell me what’s happened.”

Harry sighed. He found it easier to tell with his eyes closed. “Fred was stirring up Ginny with the new Teen Witch Weekly. I’m on the cover, with a big article besides. Ron understood that part of the article could be dangerous for –”

“Arthur showed me the article,” Mrs. Weasley interrupted him.

Harry continued, his eyes tightly shut. “Ron brought it downstairs. I tossed Fred and George so that I could talk to Ginny. She seemed very upset. I talked to her for a bit, and she – she, erm, kissed me.” He ignored Mrs. Weasley’s sudden coughing, and continued, “Apparently I didn’t sweep her off her feet. She told me I’d helped her get over me. You heard most of the rest, I think.”

“I see,” Mrs. Weasley said. Harry peeked. Her lips were pursed and her jaw was tight. “Ginny said for you to ‘get over each other’. Who is pining for you, Harry?”

“I’m not pining for anyone,” Harry said flatly. “Ginny must think that Hermione has... has feelings for me. I really can’t imagine why she would think that.”

Mrs. Weasley looked crestfallen. “I do hope she’s mistaken. Ron...” she trailed off.

“I don’t want to hurt him anymore than I already have,” Harry said. “I should just go back to Grimmauld Place.”

“Absolutely not,” Mrs. Weasley decreed. “You can return to the Burrow with us at the end of the party, and spend the night in a proper home.”

“I don’t want to be a bother,” Harry ventured.

Mr. Weasley seemed to appear from nowhere. “Harry, there you are! I’ve been looking for you. Some of us in the rooms below have an interest in seeing that motorbike of yours. I have a professional responsibility in these matters, of course.” He smiled warmly, and Mrs. Weasley frowned immediately.

“Cordelia wanted to speak with Harry,” Mrs. Weasley said.

“Well, Tom Granger’s one of the people with an interest in the motorbike,” Mr. Weasley said. “I’m sure she won’t mind. Don’t worry; I’ll be sure to send Harry back after a while.” He smiled at Harry again. “Shall we?” Harry didn’t have to be asked twice.

Mr. Weasley led him away from the kitchen and toward the stairs. As soon as they were out of earshot, he slowed his pace and said casually, “Ron explained to me what happened between you and Ginny.”

“What did he say?” Harry asked timidly.

Mr. Weasley put his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “Relax, Harry. Molly’s thought of you as a suitor for Ginny since... goodness, I don’t know

when. She can be a bit, er, unreasonable when she sets her mind. I wondered if you might need saving sometime this evening."

Harry smiled. "Thank you," he said.

"Don't mention it – please!," Mr. Weasley said. "If you did, then I'd be in quite a pickle with her. Let's hide out with the lads; it's the safest course of action, I dare say?"

"May I ask a question?" said Harry.

"Certainly - ask away," Mr. Weasley offered.

"Er... where are we, exactly?" Harry asked sheepishly.

Mr. Weasley let out a loud bark of a laugh. "You haven't sussed it out yet? Well, I dare say you'll answer your own question shortly."

The room downstairs had two large doors that opened to the outside. A barricade had been built and Harry was certain that it was obscured from view by wards or the like. With one look over the barricade, he knew where the party was being held: the Weasleys had somehow commandeered the Shrieking Shack.

Chapter Eight

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME

A dartboard hung on the inside of one of the two doors opened to the outside of the Shrieking Shack. Fred and George were taking on Bill and Charlie, and Professor Flitwick looked on. Flitwick greeted Mr. Weasley warmly. "Is it true that they're not supposed to guide the darts? With those two –" the professor said, gesturing at the twins, "– one never knows what to believe!"

Mr. Weasley launched into an earnest dissertation on Muggle games and hand-eye coordination, and Harry quietly took his leave. Hagrid was engaged in animated conversation with Mr. Granger and Lupin, who waved cheerfully at him. Kingsley Shacklebolt sat on the end of a bench next to Tonks; both of them nursed glasses of something. Shacklebolt gestured sternly for Harry to approach.

"Tonks, shouldn't you be...?" Harry began.

She snorted loudly. "What, up there with the hens? Nattering on 'bout recipes and home remedies an' that rot? Not – bloody – likely!"

Harry sniffed. "Is that firewhisky?"

" 'S been a long week, Harry. They 'jus keep getting' longer," she said, "an' besides – I'm old, remember? I can drink what I want, where I want, when I want, how I want, why I want..." Tonks' hair kept shifting from red to pink to orange and back again.

"Harry and I need to talk," Shacklebolt rumbled.

" 'Sno problem, Kingsley. I'll jus' humble those boys at darts." Tonks slid from the bench to her feet and her eyes crossed for a moment.

"We'll take a walk, Tonks," Shacklebolt said. "Hold up the bench, would you?" Tonks gave a ragged salute. Shacklebolt swept by Harry, leaving him to assume that he should follow. They strolled out the

doors and stopped at the barricade. Hogsmeade was bathed in orange light streaming from the western horizon.

“I’m not the proper tutor for you,” Shacklebolt said. “I feel bound by Black’s wishes, but you can find a better fit.”

Harry said, “I don’t understand.”

Shacklebolt turned on him. “When you went running into the Ministry, did you think for a moment about the consequences?”

“I didn’t –” Harry began.

“No, you didn’t,” Shacklebolt finished for him, “and the results speak for themselves! The Lovegood girl got by with a concussion, but the Longbottom boy broke his nose and Arthur’s daughter broke an ankle. Who knows what really happened to her brother? Granger is still recovering – were you aware of that? Were you aware that Tonks almost died? It’s a matter of dumb luck that the lot of you aren’t dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered.

“That’s not enough! The Department put Tonks and me on leave. They want us to sign a loyalty oath! It would have happened eventually, I can see that – but you forced everyone’s hand, Harry,” scolded Shacklebolt. “The Ministry knows that Dumbledore reactivated the Order, so they recalled the Dark Force Defence League – the bloody twits! It’s obviously a purge in the making. Fudge wants to keep in power, so he wants Dumbledore kept in the dark.”

“Not sure how I was supposed to know all of that...” Harry said.

Shacklebolt scowled. “An angry tutor will do you no good. Sirius be damned; I’m leaving it in Dumbledore’s hands. If he insists, then I’ll take you on.” He turned away and it was abundantly clear that the conversation was over.

Harry returned toward the doors. He heard a whizz! and saw a blur from the corner of his eye. His head whipped to one side, and the blur shot past him to strike the barricade.

“Wotcher, Harry! ‘Sa good thing you’re a Seeker!” Tonks cried out. Harry recovered the dart.

“Enough for you, Tonks,” Bill said.

“Aww, but I’m still thirsty,” Tonks complained, holding her empty glass upside down.

Bill laughed. “That’s yours to reckon with. I was referring to the darts.”

“What were you thinking, giving Tonks something that sharp?” Fred snapped, and wagged his index finger at Bill.

Harry handed the stray dart to Bill and guided Tonks away by the arm. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked her.

“Wha’d’ya mean – oh!” Tonks shrugged. “Things happen for a reason. ‘Sides, you’ve enough to worry about.”

“Shacklebolt said you almost died,” Harry told her.

“He’s dramatic,” Tonks insisted. “I need to sit.”

Harry reached out for a chair; he managed to put it behind Tonks an instant before she began to sit down. He brought a second chair over for himself. Lupin was watching him intently but Harry didn’t know why.

“I’ve cost you your position,” Harry said, “and now you’re stuck minding Hermione and me.”

Tonks’ eyes fluttered closed. “I like Hermione - always wanted a little sister, right? You’re not bad either, Harry.” She laughed, and added very loudly, “Every witch in England wants to mother you or shag you, ‘course.”

“Which is it for you, Tonks?” Charlie teased.

“What’d’ya take me for, a cradle robber?” Tonks bellowed. “He’s sixteen and I’m twenty-three, for Merlin’s sake! Mothering, thank you.” She opened her eyes, tried to focus on Harry, and added, “Course if you were twenty-three, then I’d be - what - thirty? Who could say, then?” Harry looked around nervously.

Her eyes closed again. “Don’t like being sized up, eh? ’Sall right, Harry. Jus’ mind you leave a drawbridge in those walls of yours, ‘kay?” She stopped talking for a few moments, and Harry wondered if she’d fallen asleep.

Tonks’ eyes opened into slits. “Right, the career thing? Don’t fret - overrated. ’Sides, saving the world ... ’snot a bad gig.” Her eyes closed again. When she started snoring, Harry moved to sit next to Lupin.

“...yeh need ter know it’s not as dangerous as yeh might be thinkin’, Mr. Granger,” Hagrid said.

“The great majority of wizards and witches are licensed by their early twenties,” Lupin added. “It’s an advanced skill, but quite attainable.”

Mr. Weasley, who had sat down next to Mr. Granger, said, “Fred and George passed at 17. George, be a good lad and Apparate over here.” With a loud crack, George disappeared and reappeared behind his father.

Lupin told Harry, “Tom’s a little apprehensive about Hermione learning to Apparate. It seems she’s worked out the underlying mechanics on her own.”

Harry laughed. “That’s not surprising.”

Mr. Granger eyed him curiously. “Why not?”

Harry suddenly felt nervous. He stammered, "Well – surely you know that she's first in our class, erm, by a wide margin. She's well beyond me in Charms and Transfiguration, and ... and she just understands how everything works. Amazing, really. She's brilliant."

Mr. Granger said, "From what I've been told about you, I would have guessed that you'd be first."

Lupin said, "Harry is better at practical demonstrations of his ability. Hermione, on the other hand, is the most capable student Hogwarts has seen in a very long time."

Professor Flitwick, who had left the game of darts, agreed. "I would rank your daughter among the more capable students that I have ever taught."

Harry was very surprised when Mr. Granger asked Professor Flitwick, "How does she compare to Harry, then?"

Flitwick hesitated, his ever-present smile fading. "Mr. Granger, how old do you think that I am?" he asked

Mr. Granger looked at the professor closely. "Hermione told us that magic folk are generally longer-lived than the rest of us ... if you were my neighbour, I'd place you in your sixties."

"Sixty years ago I was instructing Aurors in the art of duelling. I graduated from Hogwarts in 1916, sir." Flitwick waited for Mr. Granger's reaction to pass before continuing. "I have taught thousands of students. Hermione's ability to acquire and retain knowledge is among the greatest I have seen. Harry possesses a different kind of potential." The professor looked at Harry and blushed. "There have been times that I have literally felt Harry's power. I have only experienced that with a handful of people, students or otherwise. Hermione and Harry both perform well above their level of training, and that is the only comparison I can offer. Their abilities are quite different from one another." Mr. Granger contemplated Harry with his arms crossed.

Mr. Weasley cut in, and Harry marvelled at his sense of timing. “Harry, I’m dying to see that motorbike.”

Fred threw his last dart and fetched Harry’s saddlebags. “See, Harry, I didn’t make off with it,” he said. Harry took the reduced Bonneville from the bag, palmed it, and whispered the appropriate words.

“Sweet Lord...” Mr. Granger whispered.

“Goodness, that’s Sirius Black’s motorbike!” exclaimed Professor Flitwick. “Where on Earth...?”

Hagrid said, “I’ve had it stashed away fer years. Sirius wanted Harry ter have the bike.”

Mr. Granger let out a low whistle. “A Bonnie... a mint condition Bonnie. It’s a ’69, isn’t it? You can tell by the fairings.”

Harry nodded. “That’s what Whitehorn said it was supposed to look like – a 1969 Triumph Bonneville.”

“Supposed to...? Obviously I’m missing something,” Mr. Granger said.

Harry made the Bonneville revert to its true form. “I thought you should see it like this, Mr. Weasley. It’s not an enchanted artefact; technically it’s a broomstick.”

Mr. Weasley ran his hand along the horizontal stick, shaking his head. “Unbelievable,” he said. “So that’s how Sirius got away with it. I never knew.”

“What’d Whitehorn do ‘ta fancy ‘er up, Harry?” Hagrid asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know what it was like before. Whitehorn said it’s a twin Nimbus 2001 now.” Hagrid’s bushy eyebrows shot up.

Professor Flitwick smiled devilishly and asked, “How fast can you travel on it?”

“I don’t know yet, but I aim to find out,” Harry said. He nervously watched Mr. Granger for evidence of disapproval and was surprised to see none.

“That will be positively thrilling!” Flitwick said, clapping his hands. “I had a Vespa for a time, a number of years ago – this was in the days when one was allowed to charm a Muggle vehicle without special permits.” He frowned slightly, and added, “I’m afraid it wasn’t nearly as fast as a Nimbus broom.” Lupin stifled a laugh.

Harry pulled the manual out of the saddlebag, glanced at a particular passage, and touched the handles. “Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the professor.

“I couldn’t, Harry!” Flitwick protested. “It’s far too big for me!”

Harry said, “Give it a go, Professor.”

Flitwick eyed him dubiously. He stood on a chair to swing his leg over the seat. As soon as he was seated, the Bonneville began to shrink. “Oh, my – a dynamic reducing charm! Smashing work!” he exclaimed. The motorbike lost over a third of its length and half its height. Flitwick still looked small on the seat but was no longer dwarfed.

The professor grasped the handles, which swept back to reach him more comfortably. “Did Devlin Whitehorn do this himself?” Flitwick asked.

“He told me that he convinced a jinni to help,” Harry replied.

Professor Flitwick paled and said, “I shudder to think what this cost.” He stepped off and onto the chair, and the Bonneville returned to the proper size for Harry.

Mr. Granger’s fingers gently traced the nameplate on the fuel tank. “It feels so real,” he gasped.

“Go ahead,” Harry said, motioning to the seat.

“May I?” Mr. Granger’s glee was evident as he settled onto the Bonneville. It adjusted to him slightly, and he did his best to avoid a startled expression.

Harry touched the handle and whispered “Veho Triumph”. The motorbike did a credible imitation of starting. Mr. Granger held the handbrake and lightly turned the throttle, which generated a satisfying rumble. He let out the brake and the Bonneville immediately rolled forward.

“What the – ?” he said, squeezing the brake tightly. “No clutch!”

“There's no engine at all, sir,” Harry reminded him. “The harder you turn the throttle, the faster you go. You squeeze the brakes to stop and turn the handlebars to manoeuvre – that’s about it.”

“I take it that she... flies?” Mr. Granger asked quietly. Harry nodded.

Mr. Granger took a deep breath, and asked impulsively, “Any chance you’d take me up?”

Harry froze. “I don’t have helmets,” he said, hoping that might provide a plausible excuse.

“Well...” began George.

Fred said, “We were saving these for later. Shall we?”

“Good enough,” George said; he produced a large wrapped box.

Harry took the box gingerly. “Dobby and Winky weren’t fond of that last box of yours,” he muttered.

“This one’s safe to open,” Mr. Weasley said, adding hastily, “unless you two have made changes?”

“No pranks – we promise,” George said firmly.

Harry tore off the paper and opened the box. Inside were two matching motorbike helmets – black with red and gold flames, and clear shields.

“They’re, erm, a little adjustable,” Fred said sheepishly.

“Not enough to spook a Muggle, even if he were to put one on,” George added.

“Any other modifications that you lads care to disclose?” Mr. Weasley asked, trying to sound stern.

Fred fidgeted, and George said, “There’s a variation on the charm behind the Extendable Ears, that’s all.” He took one of the helmets, and put it on. “Put on the other, Harry, and lower the shield.”

“How does it feel?” George asked. Harry thought it sounded like George was in the helmet with him.

“Brilliant,” Harry answered.

“This way, you can talk to whoever’s riding with you,” George told him. “Happy birthday, mate.”

Harry pulled off the helmet and earnestly shook hands first with Fred and then with George. “Thanks, they’re amazing. Still, I don’t know about a ride just now. We must be warded in; I assume the party’s here on account of security?”

Lupin looked up from the manual for the Bonnie. “It appears that the bike has an invisibility charm. You’re already keyed to the wards, so it shouldn’t be much of a bother.”

Mr. Granger was still sitting on the Bonneville. Harry resisted a sigh. “If you’re up for it...?” Harry offered, holding out the helmet in his hand.

Harry had his answer when Mr. Granger immediately donned the helmet. He took the other helmet from George, and slid onto the Bonneville in front of Mr. Granger.

“Can you hear me?” Harry asked.

“Outstanding,” Mr. Granger said. “That would have come in handy.”

“Any fear of heights?” Harry asked him.

“No,” Mr. Granger replied, “that’s Cordelia’s cross to bear.”

Harry pressed. “What about speed, or sudden turns?”

“I used to ride a lot – on the ground, of course,” Mr. Granger told Harry. “I liked it very, very fast. Don’t tell that to Hermione, by the way. Why all the questions? Are you intending to spook me?”

“Certainly not!” Harry insisted. “It’s just that Hermione’s a very, um, nervous flier. I thought that I should check first. Hang on, then.” The motorbike lifted off the floor and began to drift slightly. He gathered in the handlebars and edged forward out of the doors. The bike was back-heavy but felt more or less as a broom was intended. “I’m going to use an invisibility charm,” he explained. “It wouldn’t do for anyone to see us flying about. You won’t be able to see yourself or me or the motorbike. Just mind your grasp, and we’ll be fine.”

“Right then – let’s do this,” Mr. Granger resolved.

Harry allowed the Bonneville to slowly rise above the barricades. Soon they could see the lamps of Hogsmeade. He felt Mr. Granger tense. “Everything all right?” he asked.

“I’ve never actually seen Hermione perform any, um, you know?” Mr. Granger said. “Some of her books are passing strange, but this... goodness, you’re her schoolmate. This brings it home, somehow.”

Harry checked in with Mr. Granger once more and then gunned the throttle. Mr. Granger shouted, but it was the sort of joyful shout that

Harry associated with children at play. They covered the mile to the village in just less than thirty seconds. Harry climbed higher to be certain that no one on the ground would hear them; then he slowed to a crawl, and slowly drifted five hundred feet above the rooftops.

“The game you play on the broomsticks – Quidditch, is it? Do you fly that fast during a game?” Mr. Granger asked.

“I play the Seeker position,” Harry explained. “I can spend a lot of time just watching and drifting. When I’m in play, though, I’m going as fast as the broom will allow. The top speed on a Firebolt’s better than 140.”

“It sounds dangerous,” Mr. Granger observed.

“I’ve been to the hospital wing a time or two,” Harry admitted. “Hermione doesn’t care much for Quidditch.” Mr. Granger didn’t say anything.

Harry continued to drift over the village. “Everything still all right, sir?” he asked.

Mr. Granger said quietly, “Fine, Harry. Just fine.”

“Let’s have a look at Hogwarts, then,” Harry said. “If you feel a sudden need to leave, let me know, right?”

As the Bonnie passed over the Quidditch pitch, Mr. Granger shuddered slightly and then tightened his grip. “Good Lord, will you look at that?” he said in awe. “It looked like a ruin before, but now... it’s magnificent...”

“I was hoping that the aversion charms might not affect you if you were with me,” Harry said. “Let’s have a closer look, but do let me know if anything changes.”

Harry took a slow loop around the castle, pointing out the Great Hall and the tower that held Gryffindor House. Mr. Granger marvelled all the while, and Harry was glad to be able to show him the place where

Hermione spent most of her time. Harry moved on to the Lake and let the Bonnie drift slowly along its length.

He started to talk out of nervousness. "You used to ride a motorbike, then?" he asked.

"I had a '67 Bonnie, actually," Mr. Granger said, "and a BMW later on. Cordelia had me sell it when we knew Hermione was on the way."

"Do you miss it?" Harry wondered.

Mr. Granger chuckled. "Not until just now," he said.

Harry blurted out, "Are you seriously thinking of taking Hermione to Canada or wherever? Erm, not that it's any of my business, of course..."

"I don't know; we just want what's best," Mr. Granger said. "That's what parents are supposed to want for their children."

"I wouldn't know about that," Harry said.

There was silence before Mr. Granger said, "I'm sorry, Harry, I wasn't thinking."

"I'm sure you meant nothing by it," said Harry.

Mr. Granger told him, "She tells us about her friends, obviously, and bits about the classes. If we didn't know better, we'd almost believe that she was attending a regular school. This little ride gives the lie to that, I suppose. Of course, the last month took away most of the illusions we've harboured. It sounds as if she's doing so well here, you know? She's at the top of her class, well respected by her teachers – I don't understand why she won't talk to us about it."

Harry shrugged. "I don't understand it either. If I could be with my mum and dad, I don't think I'd stop talking again for the rest of my life."

Mr. Granger patted him on the shoulder. "You seem to be a decent young man," he said. Harry chuckled.

"Is something amusing in that?" Mr. Granger asked.

"I wish that you'd share your opinion with Mrs. Granger," Harry suggested.

"Arthur said he saved you from her for the moment," Mr. Granger laughed. "She's concerned because Hermione thinks so highly of you. Acquiescence, Harry – it's the best course with Cordelia. I tried to resist her once."

"How did that work out?" Harry asked.

"It was twenty-six years ago," Mr. Granger explained. "I ended up with a ring, a degree in dentistry and a daughter in the bargain. How do you think it turned out?"

"I want to thank you for – well, you know – being –" Harry began.

"What, civil?" Mr. Granger asked.

"Well, after last night I didn't expect – I mean –"

"I was angry with you last night," Mr. Granger said firmly. "I hope that you can understand my concern. After talking with Arthur a bit, I saw that my anger was misplaced. I should have been angry with this Sirius Black for playing games. I should be angry with this villain of yours, and not you."

"His name is Voldemort," Harry said, "and I would die to protect Hermione from him. I mean that sincerely, sir."

"That was very upsetting to Cordelia," Mr. Granger said.

"Why?" Harry asked. "I suppose I thought it would be comforting."

“She never believed that it could come to that,” Mr. Granger explained. “Even with the guards and all the precautions this summer, she never believed it – nor did I.”

“I’m not planning on it, believe me,” Harry said glumly. “It’s just that I couldn’t live with myself if Hermione were hurt again because of me.” He hesitated, and then added, “Perhaps a move would be for the best.”

Neither Harry nor Mr. Granger said a word as Harry cruised back to the Shrieking Shack. Harry disengaged the invisibility charm, and swooped down over the top of the barricade.

“Slow down, Harry,” Mr. Granger said. “What’s that about?”

They crossed through the wards just in time to see Hermione pull from Ron’s grasp and dash across the protected area behind the barricade. Ron quickly dashed back inside. Harry instinctively made for a landing between Hermione and the doors to the Shack. He turned and took Mr. Granger’s helmet.

Mr. Granger dismounted, confused. “I had thought... aren’t you...?” he began.

“I’ll speak to her later, I’m sure,” Harry said.

Mrs. Granger came rushing from the doors. She stopped abruptly and scowled at the motorbike, then closed in on Harry; it was clear she was furious about something. Harry extended one hand to quiet her and gestured to where Hermione stood sobbing in her father’s embrace. Mrs. Granger took a step toward her husband and daughter, before catching a glance from Mr. Granger. She turned to Harry as if to say something but instead turned away.

Harry flew the Bonnie away from the Grangers and set down beside the doors to the Shrieking Shack. He dismounted, reduced the bike and stuck it in one of the pockets of his aviator jacket.

Tonks was still snoring in her chair. Her father had arrived; Harry wondered if he had been called. Mr. Tonks was seated with Mr. Weasley, Hagrid, Lupin, Professor Flitwick and another man that Harry didn't know.

Harry heard Ron bellow, "It's none of your business!" He spun around to see Ron at the foot of the stairs, berating Luna Lovegood. Ron's brothers had set down their darts and approached crossly. Mr. Weasley rose from his seat.

Luna looked at the floor and shuffled her feet. "I wasn't suggesting business of any kind, Ronald. I apologise for taking an interest in your feelings."

"You should apologise!" Ron screeched, wild-eyed. "If Ginny wants to put up with you, that's her affair. I think you're a nutter, and I try to think even that as little as possible!"

Luna sniffed, "I didn't mean to presume... I promise to avoid you, if that's your wish."

"Ron!" Harry exclaimed.

Ron shook his head, as though he were just waking. "Wha –?" he started.

Harry strode toward him so forcefully that Ron's brothers backed off. "Are you enjoying this? What's wrong with you?" he demanded.

Ron tried to explain, "Look... I shouldn't have been so..."

"Don't say it to me – you say it to Luna," Harry insisted.

Ron began to fuss with his shirtsleeves. "I shouldn't have said those things," he managed.

"Try it again, with conviction," warned Bill. Arms crossed, Charlie glowered at Ron; Fred and George looked no friendlier.

Luna shook her head and twirled at her necklace of butterbeer caps. "No apologies are expected and none are required. I understand completely, Ronald. I know what loss feels like." She looked to Harry and added, "It's the worst feeling in the world, isn't it?"

Ron fumed, "How can you lose something that you never had in the first place? I get what Ginny meant about being free. Life's too bloody short to waste." He waved off his brothers. "I'm going back to the party and I intend to enjoy myself," he said before trudging away.

"Are you all right?" Harry asked Luna.

She sniffed and smiled. "Of course, Harry; I don't hold onto things. I'm happy to be here – my daddy's bubbling to meet you." She gestured toward the man seated next to Professor Flitwick.

The man bounded to his feet as Harry approached. He was tall and rail-thin. His hair was light brown with wisps of white, and strewn wildly about his head. Luna had his eyes. He grasped Harry's hand and pumped madly. "What a great pleasure to meet you, Harry! Goodness me, that interview was quite a coup for us! You've been terribly beneficial for my daughter and me, all the way around! Lovegood's the name, of course – Oddment Lovegood. Friends call me Odd."

"Of course they do," Harry said without thinking. It was another several seconds before Mr. Lovegood stopped shaking his hand and Harry took a seat.

"Mr. Lovegood was just about to tell us about the story he's been chasing," Lupin explained. A silly grin brewed beneath Hagrid's bushy beard.

"Was it something about Fudge selling his soul to druids?" Harry asked casually. Mr. Weasley coughed furiously and turned away.

Mr. Lovegood smiled. "Oh, that's old news; Fudge's soul was bought and paid for years ago. Now it appears that the Daily Prophet's about to be bought and paid for, as well."

Ted Tonks raised an eyebrow. "You have this on good authority?" he asked.

Mr. Lovegood looked very satisfied. "I have registered copies of purchase agreements, two witnesses to the Muggle filings, and a solid confirmation on background from within the Ministry. Good enough for you, Ted?"

"Sorry," Mr. Tonks said, "but you have to admit that some of the stories you've run... take the Stubby Boardman thing as an example; that was rather absurd, wasn't it?"

Mr. Lovegood frowned. "Some things are more than they seem. As for the Prophet, this is a serious story and one worthy of concern. I'm hoping that Dumbledore will come around here tonight, actually."

Mr. Tonks said gently, "Odd... do you honestly think he'll take you seriously?"

Mr. Lovegood drew himself up in his seat. "He and I have had our moments but I'm certain he'll be interested in this. I'm no fan of the Prophet, but the thought of it in the hands of Keith MacLeish gives me pause." Harry thought Ted Tonks' eyes were going to pop out. Mr. Weasley shook his head, and even Professor Flitwick managed a disapproving look.

The name was familiar to Harry, and he sifted through memories of Uncle Vernon blathering on at the dinner table until it came to him. "Keith MacLeish – he owns some of the Muggle papers, doesn't he?" he asked.

Mr. Tonks looked as though he'd tasted something sour. "MacLeish owns half the papers in England, satellite television in Europe... seems like he holds half of Australia altogether," he explained.

Mr. Weasley shook his head. "You should hear my Australian counterpart talk about him," he said. "He owns the Quill – that's the paper there – and uses it like a Quidditch bat, apparently."

Harry still wondered if this wasn't another of the Quibbler's wild hares; perhaps all the men were having him on, he thought. "How would this fellow know about wizarding papers in the first place... is he a squib?" he asked.

"MacLeish is no squib; he's a wizard, Harry," Hagrid spat. "Yer lookin' at one of his ol' housemates, not that he gave a tinker's damn 'bout any of us. Should have gone straight 'ta Slytherin, if yeh ask me."

Professor Flitwick nodded in agreement with Hagrid, causing his cap to slip off. "The Sorting Hat does miss on occasion," he observed. "Conniving, self-serving, rule-flouting, destructive... some think that he simply doesn't care if the Muggles find us out."

Flitwick's tone convinced Harry that this was no joke, and he asked, "MacLeish isn't a Death Eater, is he?"

"I rather doubt that," Mr. Tonks said. "MacLeish has one agenda, as far as I can see: his own."

"Harry," Lupin reminded him, "a person can be evil without necessarily being in league with darkness."

"Like Umbridge," Harry said under his breath.

Mr. Weasley obviously heard him; he said, "There's also a difference between being evil and being amoral. I wouldn't have believed it until Ginny and the boys spoke with us, but I'd say that describes Dolores perfectly."

"That Umbridge is as evil as they come, and MacLeish weren't no different. He chose ta run wit' the Slytherins, an' mind yeh tha' most of 'em were with Grindelwald at the time. I remember he followed ol' Tom Riddle 'round like a chick to a hen," Hagrid warned.

Mr. Lovegood said, "There's also a partner involved who I've not been able to tease out."

Mr. Tonks scowled. "I can't imagine MacLeish partnering with anyone. I'll make some enquiries, if you like," he said.

From the dartboard, Fred Weasley asked aloud, "If this fellow takes over the Prophet, do you think they'll put in Page Three girls?" Mr. Tonks, Mr. Lovegood and Lupin sniggered, while Mr. Weasley and Hagrid looked clueless. Harry knew perfectly well what Fred meant, thanks to Dudley. He turned away to hide his laughter, and saw that Luna was quietly tending to Tonks.

Responding to Harry's glance, Luna asked, "Did no one cast a sobering charm?"

Ted Tonks shook his head and said, "Look on it as a life lesson for her; she's old enough to know better." Mr. Weasley began to tell a story about Charlie and a party that quickly drew the attention of the Weasley brothers away from their darts.

Harry slipped away to kneel next to Luna and the sleeping Tonks. Luna said quietly, "I don't think she's well. There are better ways to teach someone a lesson."

Harry said, "I'd take care of it, but I've never even heard of a sobering charm. It's not something Flitwick's likely to teach fifth-years, eh?"

Luna managed a slight smile. "The incantation is finite crapulam, if you care to try it."

"Why would you...?" Harry began, but trailed off as his gaze shifted toward Mr. Lovegood.

"It's not like that," Luna insisted. "My daddy had a very difficult time after my mum died. He stopped drinking before I left for Hogwarts."

"Wouldn't it be dangerous to cast a sobering charm on yourself when you're the one in need of it?" Harry asked. "That's how you heard of it, right? Your father cast it?"

“I learned how to cast it myself when I was nine,” Luna said. “It worked if I put my hands on him. Underage magic isn’t closely tracked until a witch is accepted to Hogwarts.”

“You taught yourself wandless magic when you were nine years old?” Harry asked, to be sure of what he was hearing. Luna nodded in silence.

Harry fished out his wand. “You’re full of surprises,” he said with a grin.

“What a lovely thing to say!” Luna cooed in a singsong voice as Harry cast the sobering charm. Tonks stirred, and then resumed snoring.

“She should feel better in a few minutes. Thank you, Harry,” Luna said.

Harry shrugged. “It was the right thing to do. I’m glad that you spoke out.” He stood up. “I’m going upstairs for a bit, then. Are you all right – you know, with what Ron said?”

Luna smiled and her large eyes twinkled. “Eventually Ronald will offer me food. It’s a strange way to apologise, but I find it endearing.”

Someone upstairs had tuned a wireless to the WWN music service. Harry cringed; most wizarding music sounded to him like the cries of a caged animal. A number of young people were dancing. Ginny was practically dragging a visibly exhausted Colin Creevey. Harry considered it appropriate punishment for his hand in the Teen Witch Weekly article. Several women were seated around a table near the door to the adjacent kitchen. Harry saw Professor McGonagall at the near end; she was watching one couple with evident disapproval.

Harry looked closer at the couple and realised that it was Ron and Lavender Brown. Enchanted lanterns backlit the room, and Harry couldn’t see any light shining between the two as they wriggled together. Harry looked for Mrs. Weasley and eventually spotted her sitting very stiffly at the far end of the table; he saw no sign of Mrs.

Granger. Harry became angrier each time his eyes passed over Ron and Lavender.

“Oi, Harry!” said Neville as he tapped Harry on the shoulder.

Harry forcibly exhaled. “Hello, Neville. I expected you’d be with Ginny,” he said.

“With Ginny? No, I did my bit – you know, sympathetic ear and all? I thought I’d leave the rest to Colin.” Neville gestured toward the elder Creevey, who was sweat-soaked and trembling.

“That looks to have been a good choice,” Harry observed.

“I’ve got something for you... it’s in here somewhere,” Neville said as he felt around the inside of his cloak. “Ah!” He produced a small box wrapped in red paper.

“You didn’t need to bring anything,” Harry said, tugging at the paper. Inside was a very slender and wicked-looking contraption.

“It’s a –” Neville began.

“It’s a wand holster,” Harry realised. “I think I saw this sort at Ollivanders.”

“Then you know how they work?” Neville asked. “Gran and Great-Uncle Algie both think they’re dead useful.”

“It’s a brilliant gift, really,” Harry assured him, “but it must have been expensive.”

“Gran covered most of it,” admitted Neville. “It’s her way of thanking you for putting up with me. Happy birthday, Harry.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. “I’ll put it to good use, I’m sure of that. I would have brought you something if I’d known you would be here. It’s your birthday, too, after all,” Harry said.

“It was yesterday, actually,” Neville said. “How did you know?”

“Erm... you must have said something once,” Harry covered.

Neville nodded. “I suppose I must have. Hermione brought me a gift – it’s a book on memory charms... Harry?”

Harry absently shook Neville’s hand. “Listen... thanks again; it’s really smashing. I just need to... I’ll see you soon, right?” He walked briskly down the stairs and out the doors toward the barricade.

He could barely make out Hermione and Mr. Granger, leaning against the low wall. He didn’t notice Mrs. Granger sitting on the ground until he had passed her.

“Hello, Harry,” she said quietly.

Harry froze. “Hello, Mrs. Granger. I was just checking –”

“They’ve been sitting like that for the longest time,” Mrs. Granger said.

Harry took a deep breath and sat beside her. “Is that good?” he asked.

“They haven’t spent this much time together all summer,” she said.

“Then it’s good,” he decided.

Mrs. Granger asked, “What did you say to Tom?”

“I don’t know... a lot of things,” Harry answered.

“He used to have a motorbike. Now I suppose I’ll have to talk him out of picking up a new one,” she complained.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, ma’am,” Harry explained. “He asked me for a ride, and I gave it to him. He said... flying seemed to change

his perspective, I thought. He said that Hermione didn't tell either of you much about Hogwarts, and that he didn't understand why."

"But what did you say?" she asked again.

"I said I didn't understand it either," Harry answered her. "I told him that if I could have my parents back, I'd never stop talking. I told him that I would die to protect Hermione. I told him that you should move away, if that would keep her safe."

Mrs. Granger's expression changed. "I'm sorry?" she said. Harry wished that he could read her face, but he couldn't; she was more guarded than Hermione.

Harry shrugged and quietly repeated, "I told him that you should move, if it would keep her safe."

Mrs. Granger fired questions at him. "You actually told him that? Were you just trying to be gallant? Do you believe you could accept that, should that be our decision?"

His arms suddenly felt heavy, as though he needed to think in order to breathe in and out. "I don't... I'm not certain... I really can't say..."

Mrs. Granger looked at him with sad eyes that, for a moment, became the eyes of her daughter. "Tell me – it's important that I know," she insisted.

It seemed like forever before he said, "She's my best friend. It would be like giving up a part of myself."

"I see," Mrs. Granger said. She let her hand rest on his shoulder for a moment and then returned to the Shack.

Hermione and Mr. Granger stood and embraced. She caught sight of Harry and raised her hand in greeting. Mr. Granger strode toward him.

Upon reaching Harry, Mr. Granger took his hand. "She talked to me," he said. "It was long overdue... you look a bit off, Harry. Are you...?" He caught sight of Mrs. Granger walking away.

"Cordelia and I are going to have words, I suspect," Mr. Granger said. "I think that Hermione could use a friend just now instead of her father. Take over, would you?"

The light of the half-moon dappled the surface of the pond and highlighted Hermione's hair. She was wearing jeans, a plain white shirt, and a necklace that made him notice the way her hair draped over her shoulders. Harry thought a hundred thoughts, and many felt inappropriate between two friends. They were quelled when moonlight flickered off the moisture pooled at the corners of her eyes.

He stood before her. Her head dipped, but not before he saw one corner of her mouth turn upward a bit. "You dropped out of the sky to bring me my father... I know you won't like me to say this, but it was a very heroic moment," she said.

"Ron's an arse," Harry said matter-of-factly.

The other corner of her mouth turned upward. "You don't even know what was said."

"I don't have to know. You ran away from him and he made you cry," Harry said. "Then he said horrible things to Luna, and he's making a fool of himself as we speak —"

She looked up at him and asked, "What did Ron say to her?" He decided that he had to avoid her eyes.

"Luna tried to be nice to him and he began yelling," Harry explained. "His own brothers actually stuck up for her."

"Aren't you interested in what he said to me?" Hermione asked.

"I can imagine it. Ron's fancied you for a long time," Harry said.

“I suppose I’ve known for quite a while,” she told Harry. “It’s just that he was so formal about it. It didn’t feel like being asked for a date; it felt almost as if he was proposing marriage. I suppose that I did react rather badly.”

“Would it have been different if he hadn’t pushed?” he asked.

“I can’t say, really. He’s just so... so... I don’t know, he’s just Ron,” she tried to explain. “I should have taken Ginny more seriously; at least I would have been prepared. Speaking of proposals, Ginny didn’t by any chance...?”

Harry frowned. “Let’s move on, shall we?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It went that well, did it?”

“The twins stirred her up, I tried to make her feel better about everything that’s happened, and she kissed me. After that, she decided she was over me,” he said.

“She kissed... wait, she’s over you?” Hermione’s brow furrowed. “Just like that, after five years of crushing? That’s peculiar...”

Harry shrugged. “She tried to convince me to chase after you, just before Ron showed up. I asked her what she was playing at, and she said that you and I should go and get over each other.”

Hermione hesitated. “Each other? She said that?”

“Exactly like that,” Harry repeated. “‘Go and get over each other’, she said.”

Hermione looked around furtively. “I see,” she said.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “You’re a bit flushed.”

She looked past him and her eyes widened. “Who is that?” she asked.

“Where?” Harry looked around, his wand already drawn.

“Over there,” she said, pointing at the far side of the protected area. “It looks like someone trying to sneak off. Of all the foolish things to do... don’t they understand the danger?”

Harry squinted and then hesitated. “I... can’t tell – too far away,” he lied.

Hermione peered into the twilight and her mouth formed a silent ‘O’ as she recognised Ron and Lavender.

Harry made a show of looking again, and then exclaimed, “What is he thinking? I told you he was making an arse of himself.”

“He said he wanted to take me off to the woods – not that I would have gone anywhere – but he said that’s what he wanted! How could he do this to me?” Hermione cried. “And with her, of all people – not an hour later, and he’s trading me off for a silly Essex girl!”

Harry wasn’t certain of what to do, so he reached out and pulled her into an embrace. She pounded at one of his shoulders with her fist and buried her head against his neck. She shouted obscenities into his ear. He held her tighter and she winced; the obscenities dissolved into loud sobbing. He quickly softened his hold, cursing himself for hurting her. His urge to rip out Ron’s throat was muted by the desire to comfort his friend.

He spied more movement along the barricade and told her, “I see something that might give you a lift.”

“What, did that stupid cow take a fall?” she asked between sniffs.

Harry saw a few white sparks near the point where Ron was attempting to climb out. “No, but I think that ickle Ronnie’s in for a treat,” he offered.

“You’re honestly furious with him, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Of course I am! He must have known you’d be hurt, and I don’t know if I can forgive him that. You seem surprised,” he said.

“I don’t know that he meant it, really, but I wasn’t sure where you would stand,” she admitted. “Ron’s your best friend.”

“No, he isn’t,” said Harry. “I meant what I told you last night.” He heard a crackle and turned to follow the sound. “Ah, here it comes.”

Hermione could only manage to say, “Wha...?” before the top of the barricade erupted; silent bright-white fireworks seemed to consume it. Ron and Lavender sat rigidly at the epicentre. Hermione gaped at the display. Fred and George quickly emerged from the doors and cried out a round of huzzahs. They gave an elaborate bow and Hermione began to laugh; she went on until fresh tears were running down her cheeks.

“I almost feel sorry,” she choked out.

“Don’t,” Harry said firmly.

“I said ‘almost’,” Hermione managed. Bill Weasley stopped short of the display, shook his head, and began to cast counter-curses.

Mr. Weasley stormed out of the Shack; for the first time that Harry could recall, the man was visibly angry. “Fred! George! You’ll help Bill to set this right!” he shouted. “We asked that you create proximity warnings, not a fireworks display! Why did we even bother to cast obscuring wards? As for you, Ron, I’ve had quite enough! Are you trying to discover how many girls you can humiliate in a single night? Perhaps I should leave you to your mother?”

The twins’ display still illuminated the entire protected area. Ron looked directly at Hermione, silently pleading. She turned and walked away.

Harry quickly followed. “Did you still want to talk with me about last night?” he asked.

“I’ve had enough for one evening,” Hermione told him. “Have you moved to Grimmauld Place yet? Could I come there tomorrow, perhaps?”

“It may have to be the following day,” Harry said. “This wouldn’t be to look over the library, would it?”

She lit up. “I saw it over Christmas! There must be over a thousand volumes and another two to three hundred scrolls!”

“That should keep you busy for a week or two,” Harry teased.

Hermione smiled and continued to walk along the barricade. “Do you honestly consider me your best friend?” she asked. He was weighing an answer when he heard a quiet pop! His wand was in hand and he faced the source of the sound even before Hermione began to react.

Dumbledore stood before them, hat in hand, bemusement playing across his features. “Good evening, Harry; and good evening to you, Miss Granger. Please accept my birthday wishes. Ah, a fireworks display – splendid!”

“You’re looking for me, then?” Harry grumbled.

“As much as I hate to interrupt the festivities, Harry, might we discuss important matters?” asked Dumbledore.

Hermione squeezed Harry’s hand and said, “I’ll find Mrs. Weasley and see about the cake. You have presents to open, you know?”

Harry nodded and then turned his attention to Dumbledore. “Let’s get this over with,” he said flatly.

Dumbledore led him back inside the Shrieking Shack. He whispered something to Lupin and then led Harry up the stairs until they reached the room that Ginny had used earlier in the evening. He closed the door and then flicked his wand to and fro; Harry watched with great interest as the background din from the guests below faded away.

There was no sign of a twinkle in Dumbledore's eye. "I have been with the Board of Governors since the morning," he sighed.

Harry thought that Dumbledore looked terribly old, and he'd never before truly considered the Headmaster in that way. His blue robes seemed too large for his frame, his hands were gnarled, and he leant into his ornate walking stick.

"We will be joined shortly. Perhaps we should dispense with your questions first?" Dumbledore suggested. "You still harbour concerns about what Professor Snape and I did or did not know in regard to Sirius fifteen years ago."

"'Dispense', is it? You think this is a trifle?" Harry snapped. "I've had my fill for the day, so let's get on with this."

Dumbledore bowed his head. "Must it be this way, Harry? Must we fight each time that we come together? I grow weary of it."

Harry refused to look at him. "I'm weary of the lies," he said.

"What lies do you believe that you have been told?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry was prepared to shout, but he felt Dumbledore's pain and regret and saw it in the man's eyes and on his face. Harry saw an old man withering away. He knew Dumbledore had bent the rules for him and had even supported him, other than his placement with the Dursleys. He knew all of that in his head, but the rest of his being raged on. "How could you let Sirius rot in that place for – twelve – years? You let it happen, didn't you?" he seethed, fists clenched.

Dumbledore very slowly let out his breath. After an uncomfortably long pause, he asked, "Why was Sirius sent to Azkaban, Harry?"

"He didn't betray my parents! He didn't!" Harry shouted.

“You are correct; he did not betray your parents,” Dumbledore acknowledged before he asked again, “Why was Sirius sent to Azkaban?”

Harry said firmly, “He didn’t kill Wormtail, and he didn’t kill those Muggles – Wormtail did.”

“Harry, I am going to describe something in hypothetical terms,” Dumbledore said. “I would like you to listen carefully. When I am finished, I would like you to explain how you would deal with the situation. Will you allow me that much?” Harry gave a reluctant nod, his arms tightly crossed.

“Very well,” Dumbledore began. “Suppose for a moment that your friends Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger were in grave danger from Voldemort ... is something wrong?”

“I’m not sure that ‘Ron’ and ‘friend’ belongs in the same sentence,” Harry fumed.

“I fervently hope you do not mean that, Harry,” Dumbledore said. “In any case, I am only using names to make a point. May I continue?”

When Harry again nodded, Dumbledore went on, “As I was saying, Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are in great danger from Voldemort. It is necessary for them to go into hiding. You believe that Mr. Neville Longbottom is their secret keeper. You do not know that they have changed secret keepers from Mr. Longbottom to... Mr. Dean Thomas, let us say. Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are subsequently found out and killed. Mr. Longbottom finds out what happened. He attempts to involve himself in the aftermath and then briefly disappears. When he reappears, it is in a public confrontation with Mr. Thomas. It appears that Mr. Longbottom murders Mr. Thomas and a dozen innocent Muggles in the process. What would you conclude, Harry? What would you do?”

“But Neville wasn’t the secret-keeper,” Harry protested.

“You do not know that this was the case, and Mr. Longbottom is not particularly helpful in his own defence,” Dumbledore added. “Furthermore, you are told plainly by the authorities not to interfere. Veiled threats are made against a dozen other of your friends. In the end, Mr. Longbottom is not judged to have been responsible for the deaths of Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger. It is the deaths of Mr. Thomas and the Muggles that are deemed of concern, and the evidence points strongly to Mr. Longbottom’s responsibility in the matter.”

“You could have stood up for Sirius. He wasn’t charged with anything; he didn’t even have a trial,” Harry said quietly.

“He was in fact charged, but yes, there was no trial,” Dumbledore acknowledged. “There were terrible abuses at the end – retributions, lies, calumny... it was nearly as dark as the War itself in some ways.”

“Why didn’t you become Minister then, after Voldemort disappeared?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore said, “Because of the prophecy, I felt that I needed to remain at Hogwarts.”

“You could have been the Minister for ten years,” Harry said. “You could have forced a trial. You could have done so many things.”

“The Board of Governors would not have welcomed my return to Hogwarts,” Dumbledore pointed out.

“You would have been a good Minister. They would have let you come back,” Harry insisted.

“Do not assume that the Board conducts itself honourably; consider that Mr. Malfoy was a member for quite some time. In any case, what is done is done,” Dumbledore sighed. “I am nearly ten times your age, Harry, and lost count of my regrets long ago. Let us return to my scenario, however. What would you do in this case? What decisions would you take?”

Harry hesitated. "I think... well, I suppose... oh, I don't know! Right, let's assume this isn't real; that should make it easier... steady on – this is a 'greater good' problem, isn't it?"

"What do you mean by that?" Dumbledore asked.

"Hermione was telling us once about a book she'd read – not surprising, I suppose," Harry explained. "It was about balancing the good of the individual against the greater good. Your best friend is in the path of the Killing Curse, next to twenty people who are about to be crushed by a boulder – whom do you save? It boils down to that, doesn't it? You could have fought for Sirius, but you couldn't see a way to help Sirius and others would have been hurt along the way."

The familiar twinkle flashed in Dumbledore's eyes for a moment. "Very well – using your scenario, which do you save?" he asked.

"There's always a way. Deflect the boulder, and then jump in front of the curse," Harry said immediately. "You save everyone."

Dumbledore frowned, and he asked, "Did you share that solution with Miss Granger?"

"I did," Harry recalled.

Dumbledore asked, "What was her reaction to your solution?"

"Funny, I never gave it a thought at the time..." Harry began. Dumbledore looked at him curiously, and Harry completed his thought. "She said 'almost everyone', and ran out of the common room."

"I was thinking much the same. Your solution saves everyone but yourself," Dumbledore pointed out.

Harry felt a twinge of rage return. "When has that mattered before? I'm not supposed to do that, am I?" he fumed.

"Harry –"

“Here’s a cracking scenario for you,” Harry snapped; “A schoolboy faces off against, what, the worst dark wizard in a century? There are two choices, aren’t there? He wins, or I take him with me.”

“There is a third alternative, without question,” Dumbledore insisted, “and you shan’t be a schoolboy. You will be a fully trained and well prepared wizard.”

“What else do you know that I don’t?” Harry asked with acid in his voice. “Do you honestly believe he’ll wait two years?”

Dumbledore reached out and clasped Harry’s right hand with his own. Harry resisted, but was surprised by the power of his grip. “I cannot say how long it will be before you confront him. I can promise that you will be fully trained, no matter what happens,” Dumbledore said.

“What do you mean, ‘no matter what happens’?” Harry asked.

“As I said, Harry, the Board of Governors as a whole does not always conduct itself honourably,” Dumbledore answered. The door shimmered and he added, “Ah, I see we are joined.” He waggled his wand twice, and Madam Bones entered.

“Good evening, ma’am,” Harry said reflexively.

“Happy birthday, Mr. Potter,” she said. “Nothing comes easily for you, does it?” Her voice was laced with fatigue. “I am in the custody of two letters, Albus. The first provides Mr. Potter’s OWL results. The Board of Governors issued the second not an hour ago. I wish both of you to know that I am deeply opposed to this action, but am honour-bound to bear it.”

She passed the letters to Dumbledore, who held them out for Harry and said, “Harry, the Board has voted by a bare majority to place you on probation. This is an inappropriate action on their part. In the event that this situation worsens for any reason, I do have a —”

Harry didn't hear the rest. The world stopped and Dumbledore's voice echoed in his frozen ears. The only thing he could feel for a moment was the rapid pounding of his heart. Motion returned abruptly, and he seized the letters. He let the first fall to the ground and tore open the second. Only bits and pieces of the contents registered as he read.

- - - - -

... repeated instances in which you have endangered the lives of your fellow students ...

... while not always of your own volition, the Board cannot overlook ...

... heroism is creditable, but does not outweigh the responsibility of the Governors and the Headmaster to all of our students and staff ...

... Therefore, the Board of Governors orders the Headmaster to place you on probation, effective immediately upon receipt of this notice ...

- - - - -

Harry let the letter fall free.

"This was calculated – of that there is no doubt," Dumbledore said.

"There were Galleons behind the vote," Madam Bones said, "and I am beginning to wonder if the same Galleons might have been behind the decision to restore Sirius Black's legal and property rights. Both the restoration of Black's rights and the decision to place you on probation took place in the hands of persons whose interests are questionable at best. With one exception, this was a vote based upon blood –"

"I can't... I can't hear this right now. I've had enough," Harry bit out. "Lupin blames me, Shacklebolt blames me, now the sodding Board blames me... I've had enough."

He wrested his hand away from Dumbledore and bumped into an invisible barrier. It dawned on Harry that Dumbledore had cast more than a silencing charm. He growled, "Finite incantatum!" and flung the door open; it collided with the wall and nearly came loose.

Dumbledore asked, "Harry, where is your wand?"

"In my back... pocket..." Harry's voice trailed off.

"You did not use your wand to destroy the Dursleys' cellar. You were on the telephone with Miss Granger immediately prior to her frightening episode, were you not?" said Dumbledore. "You are not experiencing a control problem; it is something rather different. We must discuss –"

Harry whirled around. "There's nothing to discuss. If I'm not wanted at Hogwarts, so be it! If I got Sirius killed, so be it! I'm leaving!"

"Harry, please –"

"I wonder if you're able to stop me?" Harry asked coldly.

"Mr. Potter!" Madam Bones scolded. "You will show your Headmaster the respect appropriate to his office!"

"He's not my Headmaster until the first of September," Harry fired back.

"That may be so, but a wise man doesn't push away what allies he has," Madam Bones snapped in return.

"This action by the Board is a grievous but manageable disruption, Harry. I am merely trying to keep you well informed," Dumbledore said.

"Oh, don't worry about me – I'll still do what I have to do!" Harry shouted. Madam Bones and Dumbledore began to argue behind him, but were cut off by the telltale squelch of an Imperturbable charm.

Harry pushed past a bewildered Mrs. Weasley and Professor McGonagall and stopped at the large kitchen hearth. There was no Floo powder to be seen. "Of course – it must be blocked," he muttered to himself, then said loudly, "Dobby!"

The house-elf popped noisily into the kitchen. "Harry Potter, sir! Can Dobby help you?"

"I want you to disconnect Grimmauld Place from the Floo Network and seal the doors. No one besides me is to enter the house – no one. Do you understand?" Harry ordered.

"But Harry Potter, sir –"

Harry grimaced. "Dobby, I don't have time for this. Do you understand?"

"Dobby understands what Harry Potter wants, but does not understand why Harry Potter wants it done," Dobby squeaked.

"I need a bolt-hole. Just do it, please?" Harry said.

"It shall be done as you request," Dobby said. He gave a modest bow and disappeared.

Harry burst out of the kitchen and nearly tripped over Mrs. Weasley. "Why did you have Dobby seal off... that house? Why were you yelling at Professor Dumbledore? What's happening?" she asked.

"I have to go," he said flatly.

She clutched at his arm. "Harry, explain yourself," she insisted.

"I'm leaving. I've been put on probation at Hogwarts," he growled, looking toward the stairs. The entire room went quiet – even the wireless stopped.

Mrs. Weasley loosed her grip. "Probation...?" she said blankly.

Professor McGonagall was a few feet away and looked to be in shock. "What could Albus possibly be thinking?" she wondered aloud.

"It wasn't him; it was the Board of Governors," Harry said. "Dumbledore thinks it was planned. It doesn't matter to me. I'm leaving."

"Leaving? You – you can't just leave," Mrs. Weasley said.

"Er... Fred told me that the portkeys are set for midnight," Neville spoke up.

"I have my own ride," Harry said, even as he pushed through the stunned partygoers and made for the stairs.

"You mustn't do that, Harry. It's not safe," Mrs. Weasley called out.

"I'm no longer a child, Mrs. Weasley. Thank you for the party, but I am leaving," Harry said firmly. It seemed as if everyone had come into the main room now. He pushed past questioner after questioner, answering none.

"You said you were leaving, but you didn't say that you were going home," Hermione said quietly from his right. Harry continued on without a word. He ignored the thump-thumping of the stairs behind him, and fished for the motorbike. By the time he reached the doors to the barricaded area, he was once again surrounded.

"Talk to me – please?" Hermione asked. Harry enlarged the Bonnie and then the saddlebags.

Madam Bones held out the parchment and the unopened envelope. "These belong to you, Harry, like it or not," she said.

"Why are they doing this, Albus?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"Regrettably, politics and malice have trumped common sense yet again," Dumbledore answered.

“This is madness,” Mrs. Granger said. “This magical world of yours isn’t always like this, is it?”

“Where are you heading?” Mr. Granger asked.

“There are a few different places,” Harry muttered as he lashed the saddlebags to his bike. “There’s a house in London, another to the west, another – ”

“We must be five hundred miles from London!” Mr. Granger said. “Are you in a state to ride any sort of distance at all?”

“I’ll manage,” Harry said. He enlarged one of the helmets, and mounted the motorbike.

“Harry, I strongly urge you to wait here and then to return with Remus,” Dumbledore said firmly.

“No, thank you,” Harry returned as he tugged on the helmet. Hermione abruptly hopped onto the Bonneville behind Harry.

He looked over his shoulder. “Wha –”

“You’re not leaving here by yourself,” she said.

“Please get off,” Harry said politely.

“I agree!” Mrs. Granger added; Mr. Granger shot her a cross look.

“Mother, let it drop. Harry, you’re not going anywhere without me,” Hermione decreed.

“Hermione!” Mrs. Granger exclaimed.

“Get off the bike,” Harry ordered.

“No,” Hermione insisted.

“You’ll freeze in that shirt,” Harry protested.

“I don’t care,” Hermione said.

“Get off or I’ll remove you,” Harry warned her.

“You wouldn’t dare,” she wagered. Harry looked at Mr. Granger imploringly. He didn’t get what he’d hoped for in return.

“I know that you’ll take no chances with Hermione riding pillion,” Mr. Granger said. “If you’re set on such a long ride, then she can direct you to our home. It’s at the outskirts of Winchester; we’ll await you there. I expect you’ll travel at a reasonable speed and make frequent stops – that should put you there in about eight hours, I expect. Now if it proves too far, Hermione does have a credit card. I’m sure she won’t allow you to take any chances with her safety.”

“Winchester’s a fair option,” said Lupin. “It’s not far from where we’re staying, actually.”

Mrs. Granger protested with her posture, but said nothing. It was clear to Harry that he was expected to acquiesce.

“You’ll need two helmets,” Mr. Granger reminded him, “and take this at least, would you?” Mr. Granger removed his jumper and slipped it over Hermione’s head against her mild fussing.

“Perhaps Bill and Charlie should follow?” Mrs. Weasley offered. “That might offer you a margin of protection.”

“I’m not taking a broom from here to London,” Bill said. “You should take a rest in the Midlands at least, Harry. If you see anyone or anything out of the ordinary, the best way to defend yourselves is to make a run for it.”

“Defend yourselves?” Mrs. Granger snapped. Mr. Granger said nothing.

“You insist on coming, then?” Harry asked once more. Hermione nodded, and Harry presented her with the other helmet.

Dumbledore moved directly in front of the Bonnie. “Harry, I must forbid this.”

“Madam Bones, is he able to forbid anything I choose to do?” asked Harry.

With obvious reluctance, Madam Bones said, “He cannot forbid any action on your part that falls within the law.”

“That is not entirely correct,” said Dumbledore. “If I must –”

Harry’s response was to take the Bonnie straight upward. Hermione clutched at Harry. He let the Bonnie slow until it drifted high above Hogsmeade, much higher than he had taken her father.

“You’re shaking,” he said.

She shrieked and nearly lost her grip on Harry; once she regained her hold, she clung to him as if he was a life preserver. “You should have told me that the helmets were charmed!” she cried.

Harry started to slip off his aviator jacket. The motorbike rocked from side to side as he pulled at the sleeves.

“What are you doing?” Hermione shouted. “Stop moving about!”

“I’m taking off my jacket, and we’re only moving around a bit,” Harry said. “Can’t you see what I’m doing?”

“I haven’t opened my eyes since we lifted off,” Hermione snapped. “Why are you taking off your jacket? It’s freezing up here!”

“A warming charm’s out, I think,” Harry admitted. “I’ve not cast one in a while and I’m a bit on edge, so unless you’d rather I set you afire...” He turned, swinging his legs around until he was facing her.

She protested through the entire manoeuvre, grabbing at his arms and torso and pulling at his shirtsleeves.

“Open your eyes,” Harry said.

“I can’t,” Hermione insisted; “I’ll lose my balance and fall.”

“You’re not clumsy. Are you afraid of heights like your mother?” Harry asked.

She clutched his forearms; her eyes were squeezed shut. “How did you know that?” Hermione wondered aloud.

“Your father told me,” Harry explained. “I’m guessing at the rest from your love for brooms and the grip you have on me.”

“I’m not afraid of heights,” Hermione said. “I’m fine in the Owlery, or the Astronomy Tower. I walked the steps at the Eiffel Tower. I’ve skied in Switzerland. What I’m afraid of is flying. Not just brooms – I don’t care for airplanes, either.”

“You seemed fine riding with me on Buckbeak,” Harry recalled.

“That was a life-or-death situation,” Hermione reminded him. “I set aside my fear.”

Harry said, “Just set it aside all the time, then. Everything with us is a life-or-death situation.”

“That’s a comforting thought,” Hermione said.

Harry wrapped his jacket around her. He looked around at the skies, now mostly dark. “Just try opening your eyes,” he suggested. “What if I need your help watching out for, I don’t know, oncoming birds or something?”

“You won’t let go of me?”

“I’d never let you fall,” Harry promised.

Hermione scowled. “I know that! I still want you to hang on.”

“You’re the one digging your fingers into me,” Harry pointed out. “I promise I won’t pry off your hands – is that enough?”

“You don’t have to be a prat,” Hermione protested. “What’s so important about opening – oh!”

Hermione looked all around; the wonder on her face was clear even through the helmet shield. It was a crystal-clear night, with a quarter-moon and a scattering of lights from the village casting a faint glow. The last of the twilight was disappearing to the west. The sky had exploded with stars.

She flipped up her helmet shield and bubbled, “I’m not certain that I’ve ever seen things this clearly, even from the Astronomy Tower. You can make out all the major constellations so easily – there’s Scorpius, and Sagittarius, and... what?”

Harry shook his head. “Stop thinking for one minute, would you? Don’t think – just look.”

“What’s wrong with thinking?” Hermione protested. “Fine, then. No thinking, just looking...” She slowly took in the star field from east to west. “What am I looking for?” she asked.

“You’re a hopeless case, aren’t you?” Harry said, exasperated. “How does it make you feel?”

“What, seeing the stars like this? I don’t know – I’ve never considered it,” Hermione said.

“Don’t consider it – just say something,” Harry insisted.

“It makes me feel small,” she decided, “and very glad that I’m not alone. You?”

“It makes me feel a part of something bigger, in a good way,” Harry said.

She continued to watch the skies. “I like your answer better,” she said.

Harry said, “Put the jacket on properly, while I swing back around.”

“I think not!” Hermione squeaked. She pulled tightly against him, which made turning difficult. When he was back in place, her helmet settled against the back of his shoulder. The jacket lay squashed between them.

He decided to follow the motorways because Hermione seemed to have a fair idea of the directions. They flew fairly low – no more than a few hundred feet above the traffic. Even against the moon, Harry doubted anyone would think them to be more than a bird. He thought about asking her to relax her hold on him, but it helped to keep him warm and it was a pleasant feeling.

Neither of them said much for quite a while. Hermione spotted something called a Welcome Break just off the M74; Harry swooped down to a clear spot on the motorway and rode normally until they arrived. He was cold and she was shivering. He bought her hot chocolate and stretched his legs. Before they left, he slipped his aviator jacket onto her and she didn’t protest. With Hermione ensconced in the jacket, Harry flew higher and far faster – so fast that the Bonnie shook in protest a time or two. After a tiring and bracing ninety minutes in flight, he returned to the motorway and exited at another Welcome Break. They stopped to look at a motorway map in the entry; they had covered somewhat more than three hundred miles in three hours.

Harry reviewed the food options warily. “Are you familiar with any of this?” he asked. “I haven’t eaten since this morning.”

“Most of it will make you feel full, at any rate,” she said. “Get one of these sandwiches... the soup is passable, and it’s warm... and hot chocolate. You don’t want the tea – trust me on that.”

Harry did as she said, and they found a table. "Are you certain that you don't want anything?" he asked.

She glanced around. "I do see one thing that looks interesting. Do you mind? I'm good for it when we reach my parents' house."

He said, "I'm not worried. Here – this should cover it."

Hermione looked at the 50-pound note. "I should say so," she said; "I'll be back shortly." Harry wolfed down the sandwich and the soup; his stomach was left growling but full.

Hermione said from behind him, "Happy birthday, Harry." She walked around the table with a large piece of cake on a small plate. Two lit candles were stuck in the icing.

She set the plate in front of him. "It wasn't much of a birthday party, was it?" she said. "For that matter, this isn't exactly a splendid birthday cake."

"I haven't had many of them," Harry told her, "and Hagrid made the first – you can imagine what that was like. I think it's wonderful, but I don't understand why there are two candles, though. Don't the candles represent years – you know, sixteen candles for sixteen years?"

"Adults don't get a candle for every year – it would be impractical," Hermione pointed out. "You'd need a bucket of water to douse Professor Dumbledore's cake." Harry chuckled at the image.

"Blow them out, then, and make a birthday wish," Hermione instructed.

Harry looked at the cake blankly. "Pardon?"

"A birthday wish – that's the Muggle... erm, I mean, the folklore behind candles on birthday cakes. When you blow out your candles, you're supposed to make a wish," she explained.

Harry quickly blew out the candles and then plucked them from the cake. "Would you like some?" he asked.

"No, thank you," she said. "What did you wish?"

"Im dursnt muddr kurz ins wohn habbin," Harry muttered through a mouth full of cake. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Sorry," Harry said. "It doesn't matter because it won't happen."

"You shouldn't waste a wish," Hermione said. "I'll help make it happen, if I can."

Harry choked on a second mouthful of cake. Between fits of coughing, he managed, "I won't let you."

Hermione lit into him. "Stop talking in riddles, Harry! What happened to you this summer? What are you hiding from me?"

"What about you?" Harry asked. "You didn't tell me that you're still injured from the Ministry. I had to hear it from Shacklebolt."

She shook her head. "It was a deep wound, so I'm still a bit sore. Don't avoid my questions."

Harry said nothing, and impassively ate his birthday cake. Hermione pleaded, "Tell me what you're thinking – please?"

Harry stacked his plates, bowl and cup on a plastic tray. "You know what I'm thinking?" he asked. "I'm thinking 'happy birthday to me'. Happy bloody birthday! We should move along. Your parents will worry."

"My dad's expecting we'll keep at motorway speeds and stop regularly. We've plenty of time," Hermione insisted.

"Your mother's probably expecting that I'll keep over 100, never stop, and stop somewhere that I shouldn't before I take you home," Harry groused.

“That’s an excellent suggestion,” Hermione said, in the tone she used when she knew that she had the upper hand. “Either way, I’m not expected for hours. We’re going to the place you’ve been staying, then.”

“We can’t do that; I’m not even certain I could find it,” said Harry.

“Then we’re going to Grimmauld Place first. I know how to get there by road,” she said. “We can make that in well under two hours at the rate you’re flying. It would be well under an hour from there to Winchester. That would leave ample time for you to explain yourself.”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” Harry snapped. “Besides, I had Dobby seal off the place,” he said.

“Then Dobby can open it for you,” Hermione said. “Besides, you can’t find my parents’ house unless I direct you there.”

“That’s blackmail!” Harry protested.

“I suppose it is,” Hermione admitted. “You’re going to talk to me, Harry. You’re going to talk to me, or I’ll keep us out the entire night and let you explain that to my parents in the morning.”

Chapter Nine

SECRETS REVEALED AND GUARDED

Once they reached the outskirts of London, Harry found a secluded spot where he could render the Bonnie invisible again. Rather than trifle with traffic controls and late-night drivers, they followed the urban roads from above the rooftops. Neither Harry nor Hermione had much to say. Harry wasn't pleased at being blackmailed into taking Hermione back to London. He was tired and cold from the long ride, and numbed from the longest three days of his life. Hermione was fiercely determined to reach Grimmauld Place. At one point, he lowered their speed; she immediately noticed, and accused him of tarrying.

He set down a few blocks from Grimmauld Place but maintained the invisibility charm. As they rode slowly toward the house, Harry scouted for signs of undesired company – especially Moody, who could doubtless see through the charm with his magical eye. He circled past the house twice but only spotted a single person: Lupin sat on the front stoop. Harry waited until they were inside the wards before he disengaged the charm.

Lupin showed no surprise. He doffed his cloak and draped it around Harry. "You must be freezing," he said.

"No one else is here?" Harry asked.

"No one else was interested in sitting outside," Lupin smirked. "Dobby is extremely loyal to you."

"My parents...?" Hermione began.

"At home," Lupin told her. "Tom and I decided that you'd probably come here first. Cordelia hoped we were wrong."

"Why here?" Harry asked.

"I didn't think you'd find the other place on your own," said Lupin.

Hermione shot Lupin a puzzled look. "You're on a first name basis with my parents?"

Lupin managed a wry smile. "Perhaps you should give them more credit for their ability to cope with your circumstances?" he suggested. "They're fine people – too rational to be completely comfortable with us, perhaps, but fine people nonetheless. You certainly seem to have made an impression on them, Harry."

"Yes, I'm sure," Harry said suspiciously.

"Since your house is not accessible via Floo, Hermione, we agreed that I would decide whether either of you were in any condition to continue riding," Lupin said. He made a show of looking them up and down, and shook his head. "I think not. Harry, would you please ask Dobby to open the house?"

Dobby let them in immediately. "Dobby is pleased to see Harry Potter!" the house-elf squeaked. "Harry Potter worried Dobby with his instructions. Dobby did not like to leave Mister Lupin out on the stoop."

Chagrined, Harry said, "I should have made an exception for Prof... erm, for Remus. Unblock the Floo, but only for Remus and myself."

"Dobby will – OH! Dobby wishes Harry Potter a happy birthday! Dobby forgot to give a birthday present this morning!" For a moment, Harry thought Dobby was going to punish himself. Instead he pulled a small and carefully wrapped package from inside his patchwork jacket.

"Thank you, Dobby," Harry said. In the package was a matched pair of tan woollen socks.

"They're great. I'm, uh, surprised by the choice," Harry told Dobby.

Dobby looked to his left and then his right, cupped his hand to his mouth, and whispered, "Dobby let Winky choose. Dobby thinks Winky is a bit lacking in colour." Harry couldn't help but snigger at that.

Lupin asked Dobby, "Would you make up one of the guest rooms for Hermione, please?" He yawned, and said to Harry and Hermione, "I'm knackered. I'll be retiring for the evening."

Harry wondered, "Don't you want to know what Dumbledore had to say about, erm, things?"

Lupin shook his head. "He and I spoke at length after you left. It was less than pleasant, but I'm satisfied – for now."

"What about Mr. and Mrs. Granger? Don't they expect you to keep an eye on us, or at least an ear?" Harry asked.

"You're an adult now," Lupin answered. "You don't need chaperoning... do you?" Harry and Hermione looked at each other nervously.

"I thought not," Lupin said. "I'm going to assume that Hermione will sleep in the guest room. Try to manage that by morning, would you? Harry... well... if there's anything you need to... what I mean is... that is to say... you have had a talk, haven't you?"

Hermione turned crimson, and Harry spluttered, "What does that have to do with Hermione and me?"

Lupin smiled. "I didn't mean to offend. I just... someone had to ask whether a talk was in order."

Simultaneously, Harry and Hermione exclaimed, "No!"

"As I thought, no need for a chaperone," Lupin said.

"We just need to discuss some things," Hermione offered.

Lupin's brow furrowed. "Things such as what happened last night, perhaps?" He searched Harry's face for a reaction, and seemed to find it.

"Harry," Lupin said, "think very carefully about what you say." When Harry scowled at him, he added, "I'm not telling you what to do. Just think things through, right? Good night, then." He slowly ambled up the stairs.

"Dobby did not greet Miss Granger," Dobby said. "Welcome to the house of Harry Potter." The house-elf bowed with a flourish.

Hermione chuckled. "Thank you, Dobby. Please don't bow to me – I don't merit that."

Dobby beamed. "Dobby will most certainly bow to Harry Potter's honoured guest. May Dobby provide some refreshments?"

"Pumpkin juice would be nice – I'm parched," Harry said. "For you, Hermione?"

She shuddered. "Something warmer, I think. What would you recommend, Dobby?"

"Dobby always recommends hot chocolate for warming oneself. Dobby will make it just the way that young Master M –" The house-elf quickly stopped himself, and then added hesitantly, "Dobby knows how to make proper hot chocolate."

"Bring it to us on the fourth floor, please," Harry called after Dobby. He motioned for Hermione to follow him up the stairs.

"You'd better not be putting me off," Hermione warned him. Harry stopped before the door farthest from the fourth floor landing; he knew she would remember what was behind the door.

Hermione smiled. "Well," she said, "I suppose you can put me off for a few minutes."

She opened the door to the library. There was one very tall window on the wall to the left of the door. The draperies were down, piled atop the long reading table that sat before the window. To the other side was a hearth faced by a small sofa. The rest of the walls were lined from floor to ceiling with books of all sizes and colours, and there were rolling ladders on two of the walls. A second table and four chairs were set at the center of the room, beside a small freestanding shelf fully loaded with scrolls.

Hermione's eyes were wide with excitement; Harry couldn't help but enjoy watching her. She dashed to the nearest books, running her index finger across spines as she read their titles. "This is amazing, Harry! Look - Agrippa's testimony, and I think it may be an original! And Malecrit's plays, all of them from the looks of it. Look at this - I didn't know Bagshot had written any other books. Oooh, it's de Montmorency's grimoire... that will certainly be interesting. Goodness, this one is very dark. Oh my! I see what Sirius meant about some of this deserving to be binned! There's no organization, not that I can make out. I'll need to begin a catalogue straight away."

"I think this must be what you'd see in the Mirror of Erised," Harry laughed. Hermione's face fell.

"What did I say?" asked Harry. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to be upsetting."

"I've gotten low so easily this summer," she sighed. "I was just... never mind. Sorry for that."

"We need to stop being sorry all the time," Harry said gently.

THUMP!

Harry and Hermione looked toward the long reading table. A chair partly obscured by the pile of drapery had tipped backward and fallen, and a high-pitched squeak accompanied the thump.

"Is Dobby here?" Hermione asked.

Harry said, "I don't know," and dashed to the fallen chair.

Winky scampered out from beneath the chair, and squeaked, "Winky is working! Winky is working!" She brushed at her apron and shook her head from side to side.

"No worries, Winky. Let me right this chair," said Harry. There was a large folio on the floor next to the chair. "What's this?" he asked as he set it on the table.

"Winky is working! Winky is working!" Winky repeated. She hopped nervously from foot to foot.

Hermione looked at the cover of the folio. "Winky, were you looking at this book?" she asked.

"Winky is working! It is not my place to look at books belonging to Harry Potter!" Winky insisted. "Bad Winky!" she added and banged her fist against her forehead.

Hermione wrapped her hand gently around the house-elf's wrist. "Winky, please stop! These are my books now, and you may look at them if you like. This book has lovely pictures, actually," she said.

She opened the folio and turned the pages, which contained reproductions of a number of Muggle paintings. "I wonder why the Blacks would have this. Look, Harry – I've seen that one at the Louvre. Rembrandt, of course. I'm not familiar with these three. They all have a similar look to them. Same artist, I'd imagine."

Winky said, "Vermeer," then cowered.

Hermione leaned in to peer at the accompanying text. "Did you say Vermeer?" she asked. Winky gave a furtive nod.

Hermione turned the pages again. "What about this one?"

"Rubens," Winky said, still cowering.

Hermione reached out and gently stroked the house-elf's hand. "I didn't – er, please don't be offended – but the idea of a house-elf reading for pleasure never occurred to me. Please, Winky, don't be frightened. No one will ever strike you in this house. Isn't that right, Harry?"

Harry said, "Absolutely. Dobby can vouch for that."

Winky frowned. "House-elves can read. Winky has to keep the larder and follow instructions from the... from Harry Potter."

"Dobby is here! Dobby can vouch for what, Harry Potter?" Dobby entered the library with a tray holding a glass of pumpkin juice and a steaming mug of hot chocolate.

"Winky is working!" Winky cried. "Bad Winky!" Hermione gripped the hand she was stroking before Winky could use it to hit herself again.

"Winky was just reading this book," Harry said, "and she fell from the chair. I don't believe that she wanted to be seen."

Dobby set down the tray and walked toward Winky until their noses were nearly touching. "Dobby needs to hear again, please. Winky was reading this book? This book, on this table? Winky was not working?" Winky squeezed her huge brown eyes tightly closed and nodded up and down furiously.

"Dobby – is – so - happy!" Dobby enveloped Winky in a hug, then stepped back quickly and instead stroked her cheek. He looked down to Winky's feet, and squeaked, "Socks!"

"Winky is becoming, as you said," Winky said quietly.

"You will excuse Dobby and Winky," Dobby said. With that, he pulled Winky out the door by the hand.

"Becoming what?" Harry asked after the house-elves had left.

Hermione laughed. "You don't think that Dobby and Winky are... you know...? I mean, if I saw people acting like that, I'd assume they were in love. Wouldn't you?"

Harry shrugged. "Why not? Little house-elves have to come from somewhere, don't they? Come on, House-Elf Crusader, shouldn't they be able to read books and fancy one other?"

"I didn't say they couldn't," she protested, "I'm just surprised – pleasantly, of course. It demonstrates what I've been saying all along, that they're quite capable of being free." Harry wondered how Hermione would react when she returned to Hogwarts and Dobby wasn't there to pick up all of her hats and scarves anymore.

He drank his juice. "Delicious," he said, "and there's no one to chase me out for drinking or eating."

Hermione said with a grin, "I just haven't set the rules yet."

"It was a brilliant choice that Sirius made," Harry told her. "If he'd left this to me, I'd have given it to you anyway."

"I've let you put me off long enough," Hermione chided. "There are some things I really need to tell you. At least, I think I can tell you about them... hopefully, I won't turn into a canary."

"This is about what you signed, then?" Harry asked.

"There's also the letter he wrote me," Hermione added.

Harry said, "He left me a whole journal, as well as a letter. I'm afraid to open either one, to tell you the truth. Perhaps you could help me go through some of what he left me?"

"As long as you aren't avoiding me, Harry," Hermione agreed.

"No, not tonight. I think all of my things are still at the other place," said Harry. He withdrew his wand and started a fire in the hearth.

Hermione sat down on the sofa; she closed her eyes and soaked in the warmth.

Harry eventually broke the silence. "I have something to tell you. At least, I want to tell you. I just... it doesn't seem like a good idea."

"I didn't think you'd be the one to speak first. That's a hopeful sign." Hermione sat up. "Why don't you come over here?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea, either," Harry said.

"Oh. Are you... is this about what happened last night, erm, before I left?" asked Hermione.

Harry said nervously, "We should talk about that as well, I suppose. The thing I want to tell you, it's been with me a while."

She asked him, "Is this about the reason you stayed away from us, then? If it is, then of course I want to know. Why wouldn't you want to tell me that?"

He buried his face in his hands. "Because it'll change everything. It'll change everything, and there'll be no changing it back." He lowered his hands, still looking down. "If I tell you this, you might never be safe again."

"Harry," Hermione said gently, "I think it would be a very good idea if you sat over here. Please. While you think about whether you should tell me – well, whatever it is you have to tell – perhaps I should tell you about what I signed last night... if I'm able."

Harry reluctantly sat on the other end of the couch from Hermione. "You're still worried that you'll be hexed?"

She said, "I don't know which would be more cruel – hexing me so that I can't tell you, or allowing me to tell you. I feel the same as you; if we finish this conversation, I'm afraid everything will change."

Harry swallowed hard, and then said, "Then perhaps we shouldn't be talking."

Hermione slowly shook her head from side to side. "I'm trapped at the centre of a bridge, Harry. Both ends are on fire. I can go back to where I came from, but the fire is everywhere. I can't jump over it, and I'll never be able to run through it without burning. If I stay in the centre, the fire will eventually reach me. As for the flames ahead, who knows? What should I do?"

"What is it with scenarios?" Harry asked. "Fine, then. How high is the bridge?"

She rolled her eyes but smiled faintly. "I'm not letting you get off that easily; it's a thousand feet high. What should I do?"

"We're Gryffindors," he said at last. "We go forward."

Hermione nodded; she sounded uneasy. "Mr. Diggle owed everyone their formal copies of the will this morning. There was a copy of what I signed, as well. I assume everyone else received the same?"

Harry said, "I don't know; I've been given more stacks of paper than I know what to do with."

Hermione pulled a piece of parchment from the front pocket of her denims. "I had a thought... perhaps it will work, and perhaps it won't," she said. "Take it from me and read it. I won't give it to you, and I won't say anything."

"Clever," he said, and she grew pale. "Are you sure you want to do this? We can still jump over the side."

She closed her eyes. "Gryffindors go forward, right?" she said. Harry wrested the parchment from her hand, and read it.

- - - - -

I, Hermione Jean Granger, solemnly swear that I will help Harry James Potter find and experience true love, no matter the sacrifice required, for Harry has known little love and much sorrow. I solemnly swear that I will not forsake Harry when others do, knowing full well that such a promise may exact a terrible personal price. I solemnly swear that I will lighten up a bit and venture out of the library from time to time, because life is short and the greatest pleasures in life aren't found in a book. To honour Sirius, James and Lily, I promise to break at least one rule per month during my remaining time at Hogwarts (Sirius allows that the rules may be minor ones). Finally, I solemnly swear that I will play by Sirius' rules tonight, certainly against the better judgment of me and those assembled, and shall refrain from cursing his name until tomorrow.

This I so swear before all authority, both civil and supreme, on this 30th day of July.

Signed

Hermione Jean Granger

- - - - -

He handed the parchment back to her without a word.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered. "Say something. Please. Your hand is shaking – Harry, please say something."

Harry closed his eyes. "He had no right," he said in a low monotone.

"It felt right to me – it still does," she whispered.

Harry felt a catch in his throat. "He had no right to do this to you," he said more forcefully. "It's wrong."

Hermione reached for his hand. "He did nothing to me. I had to make a choice last night, and I chose you."

Harry pulled his hand away. "He asked you to be a human sacrifice, and you said yes! How could you do that? How could he do that? I thought I knew him. I thought – I thought he loved me."

"Harry, he did love you," Hermione said, her eyes pleading. "He does love you. You have to believe me. The letter he wrote –"

Harry seized both of her hands and squeezed. "Did you read what you signed, did you really read it? The whole thing's about what you're expected to give up on my behalf! What did it say – 'sacrifice' and 'terrible price'? I – I won't let you, that's all. I won't allow this!"

Hermione said, "It's done, and I don't want it undone," and a tear trickled down her cheek.

Harry wiped it away with his fingertips, and she shuddered. "If this stands, it would be like this all the time," he said.

She told him, "You should read his letter," and fumbled through her pockets.

Harry pulled away. "If this is how things are going to be, then I can't possibly tell –"

Hermione's eyes lit. "It's about the prophecy, isn't it?" she said abruptly.

"Where did that come from?" Harry asked, sitting up straight.

"You heard it, didn't you?" Hermione asked. "You heard it before the orb broke."

"No, I didn't hear it then," Harry said.

"That's why you hid from us all summer, Harry, isn't it? You know what the prophecy says, and you don't think that you can tell anyone. You're pushing me away... no." She stopped, stricken.

"Hermione – please!" Harry pleaded.

She insisted, "No! It doesn't... Harry, Divination is very flimsy. Trelawney predicted your imminent death every week –"

"Stop it! Please stop!" Harry shouted.

Hermione pleaded, "Harry, you have to share this with someone. I swear to you that I can handle it!"

There was a knock at the door. "Harry, is everything all right in there?"

Harry spun to face the closed door. "Remus, I thought you were going to bed."

Lupin called out, "I could hear you two floors down. May I come in?"

Harry started to refuse, but Hermione said loudly, "Yes!"

Lupin slowly strolled toward the fireplace. He extended his hands toward the fire, palms out. "It's warm in here, isn't it? I should light the fireplace in my room on occasion." Without turning away from the fire, he asked, "Let's talk about what you wanted to stop, Harry."

"He knows the prophecy," Hermione said, "I'm certain of it. It must predict his death, because he's pushing all of us away and he's afraid to share it."

Lupin sighed. "It's a bit more complicated than that," he said as he continued to warm himself at the fire.

"What are you doing?" Harry protested.

"You don't want to tell me, because knowing would make me a target. Is that it?" Hermione asked Harry. "Besides being Muggle-born, I'm already closely associated with you. Why do you think I've been cooped up with my parents for most of the holiday? I'm a target now, for goodness' sake!"

Harry tried but couldn't give voice to his concern. It would have been difficult enough for him, but with Lupin in the room he couldn't manage a word.

Lupin explained to Hermione, "All who know of the full prophecy can conceal their knowledge of its contents."

"I thought that Harry's Occlumency lessons failed," she said.

Harry reluctantly admitted, "They worked, I think. I just didn't realise it at the time."

"I can learn," Hermione insisted, "if someone will teach me."

"You have the mental capability, certainly. I'm sensing that you have the necessary incentive, as well," Lupin said.

"Remus, don't encourage her!" Harry snapped.

Hermione frowned at him. "You can't go on like this – it's devouring you."

Harry glared at Lupin, who looked back at him impassively. "I believe she's correct," Lupin said. "You need to share this with a friend. I'm not a friend, I'm... well, whatever I am, it's something different than a friend. Everyone around you is in danger, as are any wizards or witches who would stand up against Voldemort. Telling or not telling anyone won't change that. Would you prefer to hear this from Dumbledore?"

Harry frowned immediately. "I'd rather not."

"It's probably best to have his permission first," Hermione said.

"Well... it's settled, then," Lupin said. "May I...?" After a nod from Harry, Lupin retrieved a pinch of Floo powder from a small pot next to the hearth, and the fire went from burnt orange to emerald. Instead of placing his head in the flames, Lupin pointed his wand and muttered something under his breath.

Several moments later, Dumbledore's head appeared. "Ah," he said, "I see that our motorcyclist and his passenger have reached you, Remus."

"They are worn but safe," Lupin said. "Something's come up, Albus, and it won't be of surprise to you. Would you mind terribly...?"

"Certainly – I'll just need a few moments," Dumbledore said. Shortly, he stepped out of the fireplace; Lupin moved to steady him. He wore a robe over his bedclothes, and Fwooper-feather slippers over bright orange socks. Hermione stifled a chuckle.

Dumbledore fished his small wire-rimmed glasses from a pocket in the robe. "Good evening, Harry." He glanced around the room. "This is an impressive family library, is it not? Do you approve, Hermione?"

Hermione blushed. "Erm – it's very impressive, sir. I'm sorry, it's just... I believe you've always referred to me as 'Miss Granger'."

"Have I?" Dumbledore asked. "No matter – I have this sense that our conversation this evening shall place us on a first-name basis. Does someone care to confirm why I am visiting at this very late hour?" Harry pulled out his wand and began casting various charms around the room.

"I see," Dumbledore said. "My sense about the conversation-to-come is accurate. Harry, do you care to begin?"

Harry said, "Hermione's guessed that I heard the prophecy. She wants me to tell it to her."

Dumbledore conjured one of the armchairs that he seemed to favour and sat heavily. "How do you feel about this development?" he asked Harry.

Harry returned, "I want to tell her... but it's not safe."

“I don’t care,” Hermione said. Harry waited for a scolding from Dumbledore – or a scowl, or a frown, or even a flicker; instead, Dumbledore smiled. “I was beginning to wonder how long I would have to wait,” he said. Harry gaped at Dumbledore, and was relieved to see a similar reaction play across Hermione’s face.

Dumbledore explained, “I couldn’t expect you to hold the knowledge to yourself forever, Harry. In my ideal conception, we would have met at least weekly throughout the summer. By now, I would have expected you to choose at least one confidant. I would have predicted Hermione’s selection.”

“I share Harry’s concern with regard to safety,” Lupin said, “although now that the knowledge exists beyond you and the orb...”

“It is only a matter of time before Voldemort possesses the full content of the prophecy,” Dumbledore finished for him. He turned to Hermione and explained, “The first portion of the prophecy has been shared with the Order, because Voldemort already possesses it. It is the second portion that must be safeguarded for as long as possible.”

“Harry, I want to share this with you, but not if it puts you at more risk,” Hermione said.

Harry sighed. “How could I be at more risk?”

“I believe that I provided the answer to that question during our meeting at the conclusion of the term,” said Dumbledore. “Hermione, why are you so eager to know?”

“Harry’s my best friend,” Hermione answered without hesitation. “I intend to see him through to the end of all of this. I’m sure that’s obvious to you, sir.” She turned to Harry. “You saw what I signed. It should be obvious to you, too, if it wasn’t before.”

“What you signed...?” Lupin’s eyebrows slowly rose. “What did Sirius ask you to swear?” When she hesitated, he turned to Harry. “Obviously you know what she agreed to – have you seen a copy?” Harry said nothing.

“I assume that you were provided a copy of your agreement with Sirius. Is that copy on your person?” Dumbledore asked directly. Hermione slowly withdrew the parchment.

Before Dumbledore could reach out, Lupin took it and quickly read the contents. “He... asked quite a lot of you, didn’t he? It was rather inappropriate for him to ask this of a school-age witch. If I were your father, I would be rather upset by this.”

Lupin handed Hermione’s parchment to Dumbledore. Dumbledore’s eyes lingered on it, before turning to Hermione with a curious mix of pride and sadness. “These are the precise contents of the agreement that you signed last night?” he asked her.

“Yes, and I’d do it again,” she said with defiance in her voice.

“I am more interested in the contents of your heart than the contents of this agreement,” Dumbledore told Hermione. “It is your wish to do these things?”

“I knew what I was signing,” she said.

“Do you recognise that knowing the contents of the prophecy puts you much closer to the dangers suggested here?” Dumbledore asked.

“I... I have to know,” Hermione said quietly.

“I believe you, and I believe that Harry needs you to know,” Dumbledore said; when Harry frowned, he added, “even if that admission makes him uncomfortable. However, that presents a dilemma. You would have to learn Occlumency immediately, but even that would be no guarantee.” He hesitated, which made Harry very nervous. “There is another means to safeguard important information such as this, but I am loathe to employ it.” Lupin frowned instantly, which did nothing to ease Harry’s nerves.

“There’s a way that I can protect the knowledge?” Hermione asked. “If that’s true, then I do want to know.”

Dumbledore watched her impassively. “Do you truly understand what it is that you ask? If Voldemort were to ever suspect that you possess knowledge of the full prophecy, then he would seek to capture you. He would assume you to be vulnerable.”

Her voice cracked. “I understand.”

Dumbledore said firmly, “He would gladly kill you – you must realise that.”

“I would let him, before I would betray Harry,” she said with resolve.

“I won’t have this; I won’t tell you,” Harry said sadly, because he knew that she would not be denied.

Hermione turned her resolve full-force on him. “If the Death Eaters ever take me, I will be killed. It won’t matter what I know or don’t know, Harry. They’ll kill me because of who and what I am. I want to know, and you want me to know, but if anything ever happens to me I will not betray you.” Without taking her eyes off Harry, she added, “Professor Dumbledore, I want this.”

“Hermione, we must discuss this in frank terms. You must convince me that you understand the consequences of what you ask,” said Dumbledore.

Hermione stood. “We’ll be just outside, Harry,” she said, and she led Dumbledore out of the room.

Harry sat silently facing the fireplace. Lupin looked as if he was ready to say something on more than one occasion as they waited, but never spoke. After the better part of half an hour, Dumbledore returned.

“I believe that we should share the prophecy with Hermione,” he announced. “What say you, Harry?”

Harry turned to Hermione and said, "You won't stop until you hear it, will you?"

"Should I stop?" she asked. "I think you need to tell the prophecy to someone, but it wouldn't be right for anyone to force your hand."

"Would you prefer to think on it until the morrow?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry shook his head. "I'd like Hermione to know, but I don't like the sound of this safeguard," he said.

"It's for the best, Harry," Hermione said. "It can be taken off when I've mastered Occlumency."

"If you're sure...?" Harry offered – it was a last opportunity for Hermione to back down. She didn't do so, and he spoke the prophecy.

"Oh my God," she said as she pulled Harry into an embrace. He thought she was going to break his ribs. It's out, he thought, she knows now. He was surprised to feel relief, although he decided that he would feel even better if he could breathe a little.

"Hermione," he managed, "ease up a bit, would you?"

A flood of her hair moved away from his face. She stared at him, eyes shining with tears and an inextinguishable smile on her face. "Oh my God, Harry! You don't have to die!" she shouted, and then proceeded to squeeze the life out of him again.

"Hermione, I – don't – you're supposed to – wha...?" he stammered. Dumbledore was smiling. Harry looked to Lupin half in confusion and half in desperation, and felt some satisfaction that a measure of confusion played across Lupin's face as well.

She let her arms loose but leaned in against Harry, much to his surprise. "I've done nothing but think about what the prophecy could have been, all summer long," she explained. "You shut us out all year. There were so many things that you wouldn't tell, that you didn't want

to tell, and then came all the business with the prophecy, and you just disappeared. It seemed as if you were giving up, Harry, and you don't give up – you simply don't. 'What does he know?' I wondered. I decided – I don't know why – but I decided you must have found out you had to die for V-Voldemort to be defeated, or something like that. Then... in his letter, Sirius asked... well, that just seemed to confirm it."

She was almost wild-eyed, Harry thought. "But you don't, Harry... don't you see? You can win; you don't have to die! Isn't it wonderful?" Hermione finished.

Harry frowned. "The prophecy says I have to kill him or be killed. It doesn't say I'm not going to die."

"Fine, but it doesn't say that you will," Hermione said. "Do you mind if I savour that for a bit, before we go over the safeguard?"

Harry looked to Lupin again, who had settled into the same smile as Dumbledore. He said in exasperation, "I have to kill him! Forgetting for a moment that this might be a bit of a challenge, don't you have a problem with it? If I want to live, I have to murder someone!"

Hermione shook her head disapprovingly. "Murder seems rather strong, don't you think? It's not like you're going to run around offing schoolchildren. Honestly, Harry, I never assumed that this could end unless somebody kills him. Can you really envision Voldemort captured and on trial?"

"Will you say something, please?" Harry pleaded with Lupin.

Lupin's smile was broad and apparently inextinguishable. He said, "Hermione, I think that you have more faith in Harry than he has in himself."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "You continue to exceed my high expectations for you, Hermione. Harry, you have made a wise choice – a splendid choice."

“I didn’t choose this,” Harry snapped at him.

Hermione pulled him close again. “That’s true, Harry; I chose it. I could never give up on you, not ever. I’ll follow you anywhere, you know – even if I think it’s a bad idea. I’ll give you any help that I can, no matter what it takes. I want you to find love, too, like Sirius wanted. I want you to have everything you deserve in life. That’s what best friends want for each other, right?”

Harry asked quietly, “So we’re, um, best friends?”

“Of course we are,” Hermione quickly returned. Her brow furrowed for a moment. “You’d better not have changed your mind between here and the Shrieking Shack!”

“Hermione, you must remain near Harry for the remainder of your schooling, if you truly wish to fulfil these intentions,” Dumbledore said, “and if you wish to remain near Harry, then your agreement with Sirius must be severed. You are not of age, so it is not binding in any case.” Hermione began to protest, but Lupin gently waved her off.

“Your parents are teetering on the edge of withdrawing you and relocating abroad,” Lupin said. “If the agreement is broken, you’ll temper their concerns a bit.” He turned to Dumbledore, and added grimly, “That being said, I wonder if the Headmaster might simply be substituting a new concern for the old.”

“The law is clear with regard to magical consent, Remus,” Dumbledore said. “I am satisfied that Hermione understands the potential consequences of both the knowledge she now possesses and the magic that will safeguard its transmission.”

“You’re equivocating, Albus,” Lupin said. “That does nothing to ease my concerns about this.” Dumbledore shot Lupin a very parental look, and Lupin sighed. “Very well... I sense this is my cue to leave. Hermione, I’ll have a chat with your parents about the agreement.”

As soon as the door closed behind Lupin, Dumbledore said, “Now then, to address the consequences of knowing what you now

know..." He quickly withdrew his wand and pointed it toward Hermione.

The instant Harry saw the wand, he shouted, "Expelliarmus!" Dumbledore's wand shook and then slipped from his searching fingers; it landed in Harry's grasp. "If you so much as flinch, I'll break it in two," Harry said murderously.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "What did you think I was going to do?" he laughed.

"You – I don't know, you pulled your wand on her and – and – not a word of explanation – and – and what was I supposed to think? I don't know, I – I – I guess I thought you were going to Obliviate her, or... I don't know," Harry stammered. His hands shook and sweat beaded at his temples.

Hermione put her hand on Harry's, wrapping her fingers around Dumbledore's wand in the process. "Harry, it's all right. Give it back," she said.

The touch of her hand made him stop shaking. "I – I don't understand," Harry said.

Dumbledore gently took back his wand. "Why would I reveal the prophecy only to modify the memory of the recipient?" he asked. "Moreover, where would I begin? The two of you have shared significant portions of your lives for five years. If I were a full-time Obliviator, I would still be putting Hermione at a modest risk. For that matter, I'm somewhat offended that you thought me capable of performing a memory charm without consent."

Harry felt ashamed. "I – don't know – I – saw the wand, and – I don't know what..."

Dumbledore smiled. "Your apology is accepted, Harry. I am curious about one thing, however. How did you manage to disarm me without your wand?"

“But I just...?” Harry began, and then stopped. Hermione ran her hand along the side of Harry’s leg, and pressed against the wand concealed in his pants pocket. Her eyes betrayed questions and wonder.

“As I said earlier, we really must discuss this so-called control problem of yours,” Dumbledore said to Harry. “Now then... Hermione, you do agree that the oath between you and Sirius may be dissolved?”

“I will agree to that,” replied Hermione.

“You will also agree to any measures that I might deem necessary in order to assure your safety?” Dumbledore asked.

Hermione sighed. “I’m less than pleased about the idea of ‘any measures’.”

“Your parents have given me their trust, which I shall not betray. Under the circumstances, your protection will become a primary focus for the Order. You may find this stifling but I do insist. I will endeavour to keep you a part of the decision-making, as you are legitimately more qualified to do so than are your parents,” Dumbledore explained.

“Then I agree,” Hermione said.

Harry lowered his head. He couldn’t remember ever feeling so completely powerless, even when he’d been in Voldemort’s grasp. Part of him wanted to cry out, but the rest of him understood that it would make little difference.

Dumbledore explained to Harry, “The safeguard is a variation on a very old protective spell. I acquired it from a friend within the Department of Mysteries. It is not evil, but its essential aspect does come from the Dark Arts. Hermione cannot be harmed in any lasting fashion by the casting of the charm. However, it is not pleasant for the caster, the recipient or the bearer –”

“The bearer?” Harry asked.

“In this case, that would be you. For purposes of this protection, you are the bearer of the secret to be kept,” Dumbledore said. “Hold out your right hand, please.” Hermione reached out to Harry with her left hand, and intertwined her fingers in his.

Dumbledore flicked the back of Harry’s hand with the tip of his wand, and then did the same to Hermione’s hand; three dark characters appeared. “The runes will for the most part disappear once the incantation is cast,” Dumbledore said. “If you would both remain seated on the sofa, please? I would ask that you keep your hands entwined as well. Hermione, you must relax and clear your mind in the manner that we discussed. Harry, you must keep your mind fixed on the contents of the prophecy – do you understand?”

Harry nodded glumly. Dumbledore stood directly in front of Hermione, and held his wand in both hands like the grip of a sword. He moved it around in a figure-eight, and it began to glow like he was casting a light spell.

“I ask you one more time: are you absolutely certain about this?” Dumbledore asked. “Once done, it cannot be easily undone.” She nodded.

“Harry, are you going to intercede?” Dumbledore asked.

“No, he isn’t,” Hermione said; “Are you, Harry?”

“This shouldn’t be happening,” Harry said grimly. “I should have kept things to myself.”

Hermione grasped Harry’s hand tightly. “Stop,” she said; “This is the right thing, and we both know it.” She closed her eyes, but Harry forced himself to watch.

Dumbledore said ‘*Arcanum se astringo dum dolor*’, and a glow spread from the tip of his wand down the shaft. As he said ‘*Arcanum se astringo donec nex*’, Dumbledore’s robe rustled and Hermione’s mane of thick brown hair blew back as if stirred by wind.

Dumbledore touched the tip of his wand against the centre of Hermione's chest, and said, "Tutela!" There was a flash of light, and she cried out as though the wand had pierced her; her eyes shot wide open and her back arched in spasm. Harry felt a rush of energy surge from her hand to his and he let go in shock. When Dumbledore withdrew his wand, she slumped.

Her eyes closed and she began to tremble. Harry immediately brought her toward him. She was cold, and she shook so hard that Harry had difficulty holding her. He glared at Dumbledore, who produced a wrapped chocolate from the folds of his robe and wordlessly gave it to Harry.

Harry fumbled with the wrapper, broke off a bit of the chocolate, and carefully pressed it inside Hermione's lips. "It'll make you feel better," he said. He tugged her up until she was curled across him, her head resting near his shoulder. He felt as though the heat was being drained from his body; it reminded him of Dementors, and he shuddered at the thought.

She whispered something, but he didn't catch it. He inclined his head, and told her, "I'm listening." She said it again, and he laughed nervously.

Dumbledore asked, "What did she say, Harry?"

"She told me not to fuss over her, that she'd be fine," Harry said. He stroked her hair and whispered, "Hermione, don't you ever think that you were sorted into the wrong house, not for a moment."

Harry answered Dumbledore's questioning look by telling him quietly, "She told me once that the Sorting Hat considered her for Ravenclaw first."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "She does possess the clever mind associated with Ravenclaw, but I agree that she has found her proper place." He reached out and gently brushed the backs of his fingers along Hermione's cheek, and told her, "You will feel yourself again within the hour, dear girl," before he fell back into his conjured

armchair. Hermione's moment diminished and her breathing relaxed. Harry stared blankly into the fire.

Dumbledore said quietly, "You seem so like your father this evening. I find that I resist comparing Hermione to your mother, for fear of unintended consequences."

"Hermione and I are friends, best friends," Harry said. "I have no expectations beyond that, not with anyone. 'Neither can live while the other survives', right?"

"Harry, there is a fine line separating ordained prophecy from self-fulfilling prophecy," Dumbledore warned. "At the surface, this part of the prophecy is logical. Voldemort cannot possess that which he believes he wants, unless you are eliminated. You cannot reasonably expect to undertake a normal adult life while Voldemort's power grows – nor can Hermione, the Weasleys, or any of your schoolmates. There is a war coming, and none of you will truly live until it is concluded. I will not spare you that truth. However, if you persist in acting as though the prophecy prevents you from having friends or experiencing enjoyment or knowing love, then it will be by your own choice."

"You said it yourself: I can't have a life until he's gone," Harry insisted.

"A brave young lady just put your life before hers," Dumbledore reminded him. "Others have already made similar agreements, tacit and otherwise. Those around you accept heightened risk in exchange for your company. In fact I did so this afternoon, during my meeting with the Board of Governors."

"I don't follow," Harry said.

"I made certain concessions, in order to placate key members of the Board. I shall leave it at that for now," Dumbledore said. "I will never abandon you, and I will not allow dark forces to separate us. Hermione will never willingly abandon you – that should be abundantly clear, if it was not before. I sincerely doubt that the young

Messrs. Weasley or their sister will ever willingly abandon you, nor would their parents. The Order exists largely for your benefit, and the key members all understand this. Despite the feelings that have been stirred within you due to the prophecy, you are not alone now and you need never be alone again except by your own choosing." He began to rise from the armchair, but slumped to one side.

Harry jumped up in surprise, and carefully helped Dumbledore to his feet. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Dumbledore smiled faintly. "It is late, I am old, and the charm was more draining than I anticipated. That is curious, most curious indeed... it was as though I were casting it several times. I shall have to make enquiries..."

Harry felt Dumbledore tense. "What is it?" Harry asked. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"It is well past time to retire for the evening, Harry," Dumbledore said awkwardly. "I am not at all accustomed to asking... but I believe that I may manage the Floo with modest assistance." Harry put his arm around Dumbledore's waist, and they stepped through the fire into the Headmaster's office. Harry tried to avoid thinking of his last visit to the office, but failed miserably.

Dumbledore took up his walking stick from beside his desk. "I shall be fine from here. Your best friend needs you now," he said. His eyes shone – dimmed but but unmistakeable.

Harry reappeared in the library at Grimmauld Place. He quietly walked down two flights to discover that Lupin had indeed retired for the night. He didn't want to disturb Hermione, but he wanted to be close in case she needed anything. The only remaining light in the room came from the flickering fireplace, which was now returned to its normal hues. Flickering light reflected off her hair. She had drawn her arms up, and her hands were pressed against the side of her face.

He held up his own hand in the orange light; the runes were barely visible, just as Dumbledore had said. He whispered, "Why did you do this?" He expected no response, of course, and there was none.

He watched her sleep for a while, but had to turn away. He couldn't shake the sight of her crying out from the spell, which in turn brought back the image of her lying unconscious at the Ministry, which in turn brought back the sight and the sounds of the veil.

Harry wondered what he done to deserve friendship of the sort that Hermione had shown that night. He was too tired to notice that she had stirred and rolled against him. He was asleep long before the last embers of the fire died.

Chapter Ten

PAST TENSE, FUTURE IMPERFECT

Harry's left arm tingled, and his neck was sore. His eyes fluttered open to a sideways world.

Hermione's voice was a sleepy drawl. "Hello there."

"Hello yourself," he croaked, and gingerly sat up. "Feeling any better?"

She nodded slowly and asked, "What time is it?"

"I don't know," he said. "No sign of light yet – three or four o'clock, I suppose?"

"How long have you sat there?" she asked.

He shrugged, which caused a flicker of pain in his neck and shoulder. "I didn't realise that I feel asleep."

She patted the side of the sofa without lifting her head. "Come back here," she said. It was a command, and he nervously obeyed; he nearly sat on his glasses in the process.

Harry lay on his back with Hermione awkwardly beside him and stared at the ceiling. "Is this what best friends do?" he asked. His voice cracked, and he wanted to cringe.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I think that we're making this up as we go." She sounded uncertain, and he found that somehow reassuring.

She moved her head from the arm of the sofa to his shoulder, draped one arm across his stomach, and nestled against him. "Perfect," she murmured.

He was sure he'd hugged her this way at some point – arm around her back, her face pressed against him – but it was an utterly different

experience lying down. He'd never noticed how warm she felt or how soft she was. He'd never noticed the feel of straps through her shirt. He thought about escape for a while – could he slide free after she fell asleep again and sneak off to the couch, without offending her or making her angry? He knew that he wanted to escape because he was worried about what might happen and afraid of what he might want to do.

She lifted her head to look at him, and said, "You're stiff as a board," she said. He winced inwardly at the surely unintended double meaning. She continued, "I'm sorry. I just thought..."

Even in the dim light cast by the waning fire, he knew he'd waited too long to flee – there was no escaping now. They kissed, and it electrified him and made him queasy all at once.

She drew back and searched his face, and whispered, "Me, too." He knew that a silly grin was plastered across his face, and he didn't care. She was right – it was perfect. 'Who says I can't live?' he thought, as he drifted off into a very satisfied sleep.

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August 1, 1996

Harry blinked against bright sunlight. He absently brushed hair back from his face, and sat up. The room was blurry, and it occurred to him that his glasses weren't on his face; a moment later, he recognised that he was on the bed in the room that he had shared with Ron the previous summer. Hermione was nowhere to be seen.

He stumbled to the bathroom and made a futile effort at combing his hair. There was no doubt in his mind that he simply recalled a vivid dream, the by-product of a long and intense day. That didn't explain waking up in the bedroom. Dobby could have moved him, or Lupin perhaps. He found the perfect explanation – Hermione had woken up and fetched Dobby to help move him before she retired to her own room. For some reason, the word 'perfect' left him uneasy.

Harry dressed in his clothes from the day prior. The door to the library was open, which made perfect sense with Hermione in the house. She stood with her back to the door, contemplating four stacks of books on the table. She wore her father's light jumper over one of Harry's boxing singlets, and a pair of Harry's denims rolled up at the ankles.

"Where did you find my clothes?" Harry asked.

Hermione spun around in surprise. After gathering herself, she said, "I hope you don't mind. Professor Lupin fetched your things from wherever it is that you've been staying, and I sweat through my clothes overnight, actually, on account of the spell –"

"No, it's fine," he said. "How did you – erm, I mean, did you sleep well?"

"Very well, actually," she said, turning back to the books. "I've been taking a stab at sorting through all of this. I was spot on, you know – no organization of any kind."

"Uh-huh," Harry said absently. "I was worried about you last night. I sat with you for a long time."

"I know," Hermione said, pulling more books from one of the shelves. "It was nice of you to look after me, despite the fact that I told you there was no need."

"It wasn't about need," Harry told her.

"Well, it was nice all the same," she admitted. "Say, would you look over those shelves and see if there are any more texts by deGrassi?"

Harry tapped at the spines of the books as he read them. "Somehow I moved from the sofa to a bed," he said casually.

Hermione divided one of the book stacks into three smaller piles. "You don't remember?" she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Harry said. “I had... an odd dream last night, a very real one. I’m having quite a time getting it straight.”

“Did you find any deGrassi texts, then?” Hermione asked.

“None on these shelves,” Harry replied.

She contemplated the smaller book piles. “It was a night for dreams, wasn’t it?” she said quietly.

“Anything you want to talk about?” he asked.

“Erm... I’m sure it was just an after-effect from the spell,” she answered. “Could you help me with those folios on the top shelves?”

Harry moved one of the rolling ladders, and scrambled up to the highest shelf. He took four of the large folios, and started down the ladder. His right foot slipped, and he came down awkwardly.

Hermione dashed over to him. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Right as rain,” he fumed; “I just landed flat on my bum, that’s all. I hope your books made out as well.” Harry had tossed the four books clear.

“Let’s see ... good... good... good... blast, the binding cracked on this one,” she reported.

Harry pulled himself to his feet. “Sorry,” he said, “I don’t know how I lost my footing.”

“Come and look at this, Harry,” Hermione said, as she flipped the pages of the cracked folio.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s called ‘A Compendium of Dark Beasts’. I’ve heard of it before, but I’ve not actually seen it in the Hogwarts library,” she explained.

“Based on the look and feel of it, I’d guess it to be around a hundred years old.”

“Isn’t that lovely?” he said, pointing at a sketch of a large, broad shouldered creature covered in greyish-olive hair.

“It’s the Fear Liath More – the Grey Man. You can find this one in Muggle folklore as well,” Hermione said.

“ ‘Fear Liath More is a creature that inhabits the peaks of the Scottish Cairngorm mountains,” Harry read aloud. “ ‘Frequently, the Grey Man is encountered as a physical sensation rather than in its true physical form. Sensations of this type include an icy feeling in the surrounding atmosphere, as well as a physical feeling of a cold grip or touch against the observer’s flesh. A high pitched humming sound is also associated with the Grey Man’... Hermione, listen to this. ‘Additionally, the Grey Man has a powerful psychic effect. Visitors to the Cairngorm peaks report feelings of overwhelming negative energy, typified by acute fear, apprehension and panic, leading to suicidal thoughts or physical flight from the area.’ It sounds a bit like a Dementor, doesn’t it?”

“That hadn’t occurred to me,” Hermione said. “Isn’t it too tall?”

“I don’t know how tall a Dementor is, not really... eh, never mind, it was just a thought,” Harry shuddered. He looked around the room. “Any more that you want me to get down?” he asked. “I won’t drop more than half of them, I promise... Hermione? Hello?” Hermione had turned the pages of the cracked folio, and was staring at it intently.

“Hermione...?” Harry tried again; she simply kept staring so he peered over her shoulder. The illustration was unmistakeable: a wizard was depicted waist-deep in a pond, under attack from two tentacled brains.

“Merlin...” Harry whispered. He read the accompanying text.

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COGNIVORUM CADOGANSIS

These vile creatures are believed responsible for more than seventy attacks during the ten-year period from 1871 to 1881. Cognivorum cadogansis appears to favour shallow water with a strong earth element, such as a marsh or bog. Medieval lore attributed Sir Cadogan of Entwistle with the extermination of the last of these beasts in the late 15th century. Nine of the creatures were driven into Loch Lomond and were captured by Mr. Algernon Croaker in 1881. No further attacks have been reported, but additional specimens may remain at large.

Cognivores are believed to feed on the thoughts of their victims. Medieval texts suggest that victims are beset with visions of the future. Little information is available from those attacked during the recent scourge. More than half died within weeks of their unfortunate encounters, and thirty-four souls have been permanently committed to St. Mungo's Asylum.

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"Are those...?" asked Hermione.

Harry nodded. "I'll never forget them."

"Beset with visions of the future..." Hermione read aloud, and trailed off.

"Visions... he told me that they showed him things," Harry said.

"It must have been horrible," Hermione whispered. She dropped into a chair beside the table.

"Did he say something? Did he tell you what he saw?" Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Harry, he was so... I don't know – determined when I talked to him this summer, and... and then the way he asked me out was so... well, it was desperate, actually – like he had to do it..."

Harry paced the room. Things began to come together for him – the moods, the arguing, the Bonneville... the Bonneville.

“Something’s occurred to you, hasn’t it?” Hermione asked.

He silently cursed her for knowing him too well, and realised that there was nothing to be gained by keeping another secret. “The motorbike,” he said.

“What about it?”

“Ron saw the motorbike when I came to the party, and he went absolutely spare – ran off to his room. He couldn’t look at it,” Harry told her.

“He’d seen it before,” she said quietly. “Do you suppose he saw something happening to you?”

Harry thought about that for a moment, then shook his head. “He wasn’t concerned; he was terrified. He saw himself, I’m sure of it.” He sighed. “This changes quite a lot, doesn’t it?”

Hermione hesitated. “I... I thought about saying yes, you know.”

Harry’s stomach tightened. “What – to Ron, you mean?” he asked.

“I nearly did it,” Hermione said. “He – he seemed to want it so much, that I considered giving it a go. I didn’t want to hurt him. But I hesitated, and everything fell apart from there.” With a bitter edge in her voice, she added, “He certainly had no problem moving on straight away, did he?”

Harry’s thoughts kept returning to the last sentence in the description of the cognivores. “Ron may actually be going mad, if you believe that book,” he offered.

Hermione gave in to the impulse Harry shunned. “He’d have to be mad, to make off with Lavender Brown like that!” she fumed. “They deserve each other!”

“I’m angry at him for hurting you,” Harry said, “but... I know what it’s like to be alone and scared, you know – to think you’re going mad. Who knows what he’s seen, or thinks he’s seen?”

“Don’t make him out to be noble, Harry,” Hermione warned. “He didn’t try to spirit Lavender away for conversation. The only things she talks about are boys, makeup and Divination –”

“Exactly,” Harry tried to interject. “She’d be likely to take him more seriously about visions than you –”

Hermione ignored him. “– and even then she’s hard to listen to. It’d be like carrying on a conversation with a flobberworm, for goodness’ sake! It’s a wonder she’s managed –”

Harry cut her off. “She acquitted herself well in the DA, as I remember it.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “She’s curvy, she’s giggly, and she’s easy, and that’s why Ron took to her.”

Harry cringed. “Remind me to stay on your good side, would you?”

Hermione closed her eyes, and put a hand to her forehead. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for. It’s just... it’s just that I was willing to try, you know, and that wasn’t good enough. I’m the one that didn’t want anything to happen, and now I’m shirty about being rejected. Perhaps I’m the one going mad?”

Harry smiled. “You’re not going mad. I’m not sure it’s about the brain attack, either. Maybe this is just a Weasley problem?”

Hermione looked puzzled. She began, “What are you...?” before recognition set in. “Ah... Ginny,” she recalled. “I really should have warned you.”

Harry nodded. "Rather like a game of Exploding Snap gone badly, all the way around," he said. They both laughed, but it was uneasy laughter.

"I know you're hurt, and I'm angry, but we have to help him," Harry said.

Hermione frowned and admitted, "You're right, Harry." She rose from the chair, and slid her arms around him. "I thought that I was supposed to be the sensible one. How did we flip things around?" she said.

Harry carefully put his arms around her in return. He wanted that dream out of his head, but he knew that it wouldn't matter. After the safeguarding of the prophecy, he felt as if an invisible line had been crossed – that somehow the friendship of their childhood was at an end, no matter what choices were made.

Dobby called from just beyond the door to the library, "Miss Granger can be found in here, sirs and madam." Lupin entered the room, closely followed by Mr. and Mrs. Granger. Harry dropped his arms immediately, but Hermione inexplicably continued to hold him. He was certain that he radiated guilt.

"Good morning, Dad," Hermione said brightly. "It's starting out to be a wonderful day, isn't it?"

"Smashing," Mr. Granger said flatly, as he looked Harry up and down.

"You're up at last, Harry! I'm glad to see you're recovered from the ride," Lupin said, and he rushed forward to clasp Harry's hand. This gave Harry an opportunity to disengage from Hermione – from Mr. Granger's daughter, as he was very acutely aware.

Mrs. Granger chided, "I realise that the baggy look is in, Hermione, but..."

Hermione shrugged. "I didn't have a change of clothing, Mother, so I borrowed these from Harry." Mr. Granger squinted at Harry's clothes on Hermione, and then returned his gaze to Harry.

Lupin strode between Harry and Mr. Granger, and gestured widely around the room. "This is Hermione's library," he said. "She's been organizing it, you know... all morning long."

Mrs. Granger swept along the shelves, and a smile began to form on her face. "Fascinating," she murmured.

"Quite a lot of books here," Mr. Granger said. "I should think we'd have to add on, to accommodate all of this."

"By the time I hand off some to the library at Hogwarts and when the really dark material is binned, as I was told, it may be cut in half," Hermione told her father. "I was hoping Harry would allow me to keep it here, until I have a place of my own for it."

"A place of your own – that should be quite a while, then," Mr. Granger said.

"You can keep the library here as long as you like," Harry offered.

"Tom, you should see some of these titles," Mrs. Granger said. She stopped abruptly. "This can't actually... good heavens, is this some sort of joke?"

Hermione glanced casually at the shelf before her mother. "It's not a joke, Mother; de Montmorency was a very serious potions scholar."

Mrs. Granger's eyebrows began to climb. "This isn't something you would cover in a class, is it?" she asked.

"Of course not... well, perhaps in seventh year," Hermione sighed. "I'm familiar with the author from History of Magic class."

"Let me see that... love potions? You'll be binning that one, straight away," Mr. Granger commanded.

“Dad!” Hermione protested.

“Fine – we’ll hold it for you until you reach an appropriate age,” Mr. Granger said gravely. “What do you think, Cordelia – 30, perhaps?”

Mrs. Granger continued to read book spines. “She’s maturing nicely enough... I believe we might consider it at, say, 28?” she said.

Hermione snapped, “Mother!”

Mr. and Mrs. Granger both began to laugh, and Hermione turned ever redder. Mr. Granger reached out and tousled her hair. “You’re still easily teased,” he snorted.

“Over nothing, at that; you won’t need that book,” Mrs. Granger said absently.

“I’m so pleased that I amuse you both,” Hermione grumbled, as she ran her fingers through her hair. She looked to Harry, and her eyes narrowed. “What are you smiling at?”

“Nothing – I’m just taking notes,” Harry insisted. Hermione shot him a foul look, and Harry’s smile became a smirk.

Mr. Granger paused in front of the table. “Good Lord! What on Earth are those things...? Cognivores... they eat thoughts?”

Lupin walked slowly to the table. He peered at the open folio for some time. “When did you find this?” he asked Hermione.

“Just now, Professor,” she answered.

“I was too tired to insist last night, but I’ll remind you that I’m no longer your professor. Remus will do nicely,” Lupin said. He sighed. “I didn’t know what they were, in truth. You do realise that this may explain some of Ron’s recent behaviour?”

“Ron... Ron Weasley? You mean... Good Lord, when Arthur said something about a ‘brain attack’, I thought perhaps he meant a stroke or an epileptic episode. You’re saying that Ron Weasley was attacked by those?” Mr. Granger asked nervously.

“It would seem so,” Lupin said. “He has received treatment, of course; and our understanding of magical disorders is much improved since this was written.” Mrs. Granger peered around Lupin at the folio, and put a hand to her mouth in shock.

Mr. Granger took Hermione by the hands. “Of your two closest friends, one is attacked by brains that eat thoughts, and the other is marked for death by someone so horrible that most of these people can’t speak his name! It’s enough that your two closest friends are both boys, for God’s sake. Does this seem acceptable to you?”

Mrs. Granger stared at Hermione in disbelief. “You... you’ve seen these things?” she asked. “My God, what else have you seen?”

“We planned to tell you that we’d decided to remain in England, for now,” Mr. Granger said. “I didn’t expect to have my mind changed again, but here we are.”

Hermione snatched her hands away. “I won’t go anywhere,” she said firmly. “I’m returning to Hogwarts next month.” Hermione and her father stared at each other, jaws set and bodies unmoving.

Mrs. Granger looked to Harry and Lupin, and said quietly, “I’m sorry that this has to play out in front of you.”

Harry impulsively stepped forward and took Hermione by the arm. “Excuse us for a moment, please,” he mumbled, and then pulled her through the doorway and into the corridor.

“This had better be important,” she growled at him.

“You need to tell them everything,” he said.

“You need to stay out of this,” she warned.

“Do you like making decisions without knowing all the facts?” he asked.

“Of course not!” she snapped.

“How do you think they feel?” he asked. She stared daggers at him, but said nothing.

“You’ve been angry with me most of the summer because I wouldn’t talk to you,” Harry said, “and you’re doing exactly the same thing to your parents.”

“That’s not fair,” she insisted. “You knew you could talk to me, and everything would be all right. I can’t tell them everything.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“They’ll go mad!” Hermione shrieked; “They’ll withdraw me for certain!”

“It seems they may do that anyway,” he pointed out. “They may as well do it with everything in hand, right?”

“Enough! I get it,” she fumed. “I wouldn’t know where to begin, honestly.”

“At the beginning, I should imagine?” Harry said.

Hermione shoved her hands in her front pockets. “Everything?” she asked nervously.

Harry shrugged. “That’s what I would do, in your shoes. I’d tell my parents everything.”

“You might feel differently if you were actually faced with it,” Hermione said bitterly.

“You may be right – I don’t know,” Harry said. “I wish that I had a choice in it.”

Hermione looked around furtively. “Will you come back in with me?” she asked. Harry nodded. She drew herself up, in a way that reminded him of McGonagall, and he followed her back into the library.

She stood before her parents, her hands clasped behind her back. She struggled for words. “I... I have a story to tell. It’s...” She faltered. Harry wanted to reach out and take her hand, but Lupin chose that moment to stand next to Harry.

Hermione collected herself and continued, “It’s about a little girl who received a strange letter from a strange place, you see? It’s about how that little girl was changed, and how she grew up. The whole affair is rather like Alice passing through the Looking Glass, except that this story is real. Some of it... some of it may be hard for you to take in. I know you’ve heard the introduction and selected parts of the story... would you care to hear the rest?”

Without a word, or even a sound, her parents took chairs next to the table. Hermione stood at first, and later sat on the floor. She hit every high point and low point from her first three years at Hogwarts, from the mountain troll to Buckbeak. Harry was mostly silent, except when he thought that she was drifting from her own story toward his. He wouldn’t allow her to recede into the background of her own accomplishments. Lupin, ever the teacher, provided a few well-crafted explanations where they were required.

When explaining Sirius Black – and thus drawing a contemptuous expression from Mr. Granger – Hermione insisted on describing the circumstances that led to Sirius’ imprisonment, including the death of Harry’s parents. Harry prepared to intercede but Lupin gently held him back. Mrs. Granger watched Harry through the entire explanation, with an expression that he couldn’t fathom. Mr. Granger was fascinated by the concept of the Time-Turner and asked question after question. He and Lupin tore off on a tangent regarding paradoxes until Mrs. Granger cut them off.

Lupin had to explain the concept of the Patronus Charm. He suggested that Harry summon his Patronus. Harry searched for a happy thought, and then smiled. He spoke the charm instead of shouting it out like a schoolboy. A wash of silver luminescence erupted from his wand, followed by a dazzling silver stag that cantered around to face all three Grangers. The stag was vividly real, down to the individual hairs and the texture of its antlers. Mr. and Mrs. Granger appeared uncertain how to respond and settled on polite applause.

“Outstanding,” Lupin said. “You’ve happened upon the perfect thought, for certain.” Harry’s wand twitched in his hand when Lupin said ‘perfect’, and the silver stag quickly dissipated.

Hermione pressed on through the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Her parents were familiar with Krum, but knew little or nothing about the circumstances under which they met. Both Mr. and Mrs. Granger were incensed as she described the second task. Lupin took great pains to assure them that Hermione had not been at any actual risk. Harry couldn’t understand why they were more upset by the idea of their daughter caught underwater than by the incident with the basilisk or a half-dozen other things.

When she came to their fifth year, Harry was very much on guard. Hermione’s descriptions were terse, and she talked more of him than of herself. He kept jumping in until she cut him off. She showed fierce pride when talking about Dumbledore’s Army. She began to describe the encounter in the Department of Mysteries, but for some reason kept getting lost in the story. Each time that she began again, she seemed more confused. After the fourth attempt, Lupin interrupted to tell the story. Harry filled in the gaps and wondered what was wrong. By the end of the telling, Hermione seemed herself again.

“That takes us to the beginning of the summer,” she finished, “and you know the story from there.” Everyone sat silently. No one seemed to know who should speak next, or what should be said.

Harry cleared his throat. “Perhaps Remus and I should step out?” he ventured, and stood to leave the room.

Hermione said, "I'm not finished." Harry froze. He was apprehensive about what else she might have to say.

"This is who I am – it's what I've become. I... I hope you can accept that," she told her parents.

Mr. Granger said, "If we had it to do over again... we knew you were different, you know. Deep inside, we knew. When you were very young, we could label you as gifted and set our fears aside. Later, though... do you remember what happened when those boys kept harassing you? What was the one boy's name – Strauss, or something?"

Hermione winced. "Stroud – David Stroud. That's a rather difficult thing to forget. I sometimes wonder how long it took for his hair to grow back," she said.

"We explained it away, of course," her father said. "No one wanted to believe that an angry ten year old girl could make a boy's hair fall out. We knew better, your mother and me – you were different. You were different, but we loved you – we have always loved you."

Hermione seemed part sad and part embarrassed. "I know that, Dad," she said.

"Then why has it taken you five years to confide in us?" her mother asked. "We accepted that outlandish letter on its face; we were so desperate to understand you, and for you to understand yourself. We've always been proud of you – you must know that. Why couldn't you see fit to trust us with the simple truth?"

"What is simple about it? A part of me is still in disbelief every time I go to class. Read some of these books, for goodness' sake! Dad, you flew last night – you sat on some concealed sticks and you flew, without any wings or engine. It's not simple," Hermione insisted.

"No, but I did it," Mr. Granger reminded her. "I asked for a ride, I jumped on, and I flew. I seem to have retained my faculties in the

process. Answer your mother's question – why couldn't you trust us?" He looked at Harry, and added, "Why did you have to be talked into trusting us now?"

"Because I was afraid, right?" Hermione cried. "Is that what you wanted to hear? I was afraid!"

"You've had a hundred things to fear over the last five years, and you decided to be afraid of us? Why?" Mr. Granger asked.

"You've always been on the edge of taking it all away from me," Hermione said angrily. "There's always a threat there. I won't let you do it – I won't. It would be as if I asked you to breathe water –"

"– which you have apparently done," her father added. "We know we can't ask you to come home, and be something that you never were; you should give us more credit. It's your safety we're concerned about, not your identity. Do I wish that your circumstances were different? I suppose that I do –"

"You can't wish this away. Magic will always be a part of my life. If I ever have children, it's likely that they'll be magical as well," Hermione said.

Mrs. Granger's eyes were moist. "When you do have a child," she said in a halting voice, "I hope you never feel as powerless to help her as I feel right now."

Mr. Granger looked as if he wanted to say something else. Then he shook his head, and held his arms out toward Hermione. She stood up, slowly shuffled to her father, and embraced him.

Lupin whispered in Harry's ear, "This would be a good time to make our exit." Harry agreed and quietly followed him out of the room and down the stairs.

When they reached the entry hall, Lupin stopped before Harry. "Why did you encourage Hermione to open up to her parents?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "I thought that they might be afraid of what they didn't know. Even if they were uncomfortable with the truth, I thought that they might be less afraid. I don't know – it seemed like the best chance for getting them to reconsider," he explained.

Lupin smiled broadly. "Well done, Harry. You handled yourself brilliantly in there. I'm... I'm quite proud of you."

Harry blushed. "Erm – thanks, Remus," he said awkwardly. His stomach growled, and he added, "I'm famished."

"Perhaps we should arrange for some food to be taken up?" Lupin suggested. "They may be a while."

Harry asked Dobby to arrange food for the Grangers, and Winky served sandwiches and crisps to Lupin and Harry in the kitchen. Between bites, Lupin said, "I have a birthday present for you. I never got around to giving it yesterday."

Harry hastily chewed, before he told Lupin, "You didn't need to get me anything."

"Finish up here and I'll show it to you," Lupin said.

After they were finished eating, Lupin led Harry down to the cellar. Harry had never been below the kitchen level before. At the base of the stairs, two doors led out of a small alcove. One door looked especially stout and had thick metal loops that looked as if they would hold chains, and the other door was painted red. Lupin opened the red door.

Inside was a virtual duplicate of Dudley's workout room at Privet Drive – before Harry blew it up, of course. Harry lightly jabbed at the speed bag, and then the heavy bag. He made a visual inventory of the free weights. There were two large black trunks stacked in one corner.

"I thought that you might like to maintain your routine," Lupin said.

Harry turned and gave Lupin a stout handshake. "This is wonderful," he said. "Thank you."

"Everything packs in the trunks, so you can take it all with you in the fall," Lupin explained.

Harry fidgeted. "This must have been very expensive..."

"I have little use for money," Lupin said.

"How did you know what equipment to buy?" Harry asked.

"Oh, your cousin was most helpful," Lupin said.

Harry's eyes widened. "My cousin? You talked to Dudley?"

"I contacted him via Arabella Figg," Lupin explained. "He sent me an equipment list. He also sent along that package next to the trunks."

A long, flat package wrapped in brown paper leaned against the bottom trunk. When Harry opened the end of the wrapping, an envelope fell out. He carefully pulled out a painted canvas. A figure in silhouette faced the ocean, its back to the viewer, looking out at a twilight sky and burnt-orange horizon. It was one of the half-dozen paintings and drawings that had hung in Harry's room. Harry wondered if and how Dudley had known it was his favourite.

Lupin looked at the painting. "That's very nice. Much better than previous gifts from the Dursleys, I imagine?"

"That wouldn't take much," Harry said. "This was hanging in my room. Dudley painted it."

"You must be joking," Lupin said. "Your cousin doesn't look the artistic type."

"He's really quite good," Harry said absently, as he opened the envelope. There was a sheet of typing paper folded inside, covered with a rough scrawl.

- - - - -

Potter –

Am using enjoying new weights and bags. Bought what I had before, so I can pay my trainer if Dad welches. Took the Latin exam yesterday. Don't know how it went but it felt good. Thought I'd send a painting for your place. Mum said you fancied this one. Water and sky colours turned out well, I think. Stay away from Lord Nutter, right?

Dudley

- - - - -

Harry handed Lupin the note. "‘Lord Nutter’?" Lupin laughed.

Harry murmured, "I preferred ‘Lord Whoop-de-do’," but Lupin didn't hear.

"Shall we check on our guests?" Lupin asked.

Harry slid the painting back into its wrapping, and tucked it under his arm. On the way out, Harry pointed at the other door and asked, "What's in there?"

Lupin looked away from Harry. "That room is for my use," he grumbled. "It's well reinforced." Harry left it alone.

Dobby and Winky were in the kitchen; Dobby was washing plates while Winky surveyed the pantry. Dobby grinned at Harry. "Harry Potter has seen his present from Mister Lupin," he said. "It must be to his liking."

"Very much so," Harry agreed. "Is... everything in hand upstairs?"

"The Grangers have moved to the drawing room," Dobby squeaked. "Dobby left beverages there."

“We should make an appearance – don’t you agree?” Lupin asked.

Winky peeked out of the pantry, and shot a cross look at Dobby. “Miss Granger’s parents moved,” she added, “but Miss Granger remains in the library, Harry Potter.”

The corners of Lupin’s mouth turned up slightly. “We see her parents first, Harry. It’s good form.”

The door to the drawing room was open. As they climbed the stairs, Harry fell farther and farther behind Lupin. He could hear Lupin talking to the Grangers, but couldn’t make out what they were saying. No one’s voice was raised, which Harry took as a good sign. He trudged up the last steps, and faced the open doorway. Mr. Granger caught sight of him, and motioned for Harry to enter. Lupin watched Harry with a curious expression, one that left Harry a bit uncomfortable.

Mrs. Granger looked at Harry. She stood with her hands clasped and her head tilted a bit – it was the same posture Hermione took when she was nervous or uncertain, Harry realised. “While we do not appreciate that Hermione needed your permission before she would talk to us –” she began. Mr. Granger nodded fervently.

“– we do appreciate what you accomplished by interceding,” Mrs. Granger continued. “There’s quite a lot that we find troubling in all of this, as you might imagine.” She hesitated, and then added, “We would be pleased if you would join us for dinner this Sunday, at our home.”

“Yes – yes, of course,” Harry stammered, “I’d, erm, be delighted.” It occurred to Harry that he didn’t know what day of the week it was. Sweat began to bead at Harry’s temples. He looked to Mr. Granger, and hastily added, “Are you planning to...?”

“No,” Mr. Granger said sternly and formally, his arms crossed. “Hermione was rather persuasive. Given her attitude with regard to you, we think it important that we all get to know one another – very well. That might require several Sunday dinners. Surely you agree.”

Harry looked to Lupin, who showed no inclination to save him. Mr. Granger watched and waited – he was a predator stalking his prey. Mrs. Granger maintained her nervous posture, and regarded Harry with the same unfathomable expression as when she had heard the story of his childhood. Show no fear, he thought, show no fear!

He swallowed hard. “Erm – yes, certainly – er... very well, yes. I had hoped we made a start toward that at the Weasley’s, sir.” Mr. Granger’s countenance lightened a bit, but he said nothing in response.

Mrs. Granger said, “Remus is going to call for our ride now. You have a few minutes.” Harry hesitated, not quite comprehending what she was telling him.

“Upstairs! Go!” Mr. Granger commanded, waving his hands toward the doorway. Harry nearly dropped the wrapped painting in his haste to leave. There were sounds behind him as he quickly mounted the stairs – for a moment, he thought that he heard laughter.

Hermione was on one of the ladders in the library, extracting more books. Harry knocked on the doorframe, rather than risk startling her. “Harry!” she called out. She carefully climbed down the ladder, set an armful of books on the table, and bounded toward him. He barely had a chance to set down the painting, before she was upon him – her cheek pressed against his ear, and hair everywhere.

“I’m so glad you’re not moving away,” he said. He reached up, and swept her hair from his face.

She pulled back and smiled mischievously. “What did they tell you?” she asked.

“Your father said you were persuasive,” Harry said.

“Persuasive... you could say that,” Hermione laughed, her arms still around Harry’s waist.

“Well?”

“Well – what?” Hermione asked.

Harry pretended to shake her. “Tell me!” he demanded.

“I told them that if they took me to Canada I’d learn Apparation on my own, and that I didn’t care if I ended up splinched or worse. I said that as soon as I learned how, I’d Apparate right back to Hogwarts,” she said proudly.

“I’d like to see you Apparate across the Atlantic Ocean,” Harry teased.

“What they didn’t know didn’t hurt them – I was simply making a point,” Hermione explained. “They had to know that I’d simply refuse to go with them.”

“Your parents want to have me for Sunday dinner,” Harry told her.

“Really?” she said, and her eyes widened a bit. “Sunday dinner at the house?”

“Uh-huh. I couldn’t tell if they want me rolled in crumbs and baked, or if they’d prefer me raw,” Harry moaned, only half-joking.

“That’s terrible,” Hermione said, as she playfully struck him with the back of her hand. She added, more seriously, “Obviously, you don’t understand the meaning of the invitation.”

“What, there’s more?” Harry asked nervously.

“Sunday dinner is a family meal in our house – only family. Mother and Dad evict all the Order members; even Tonks generally eats out in the front room.” Hermione thought for a moment. “I can’t think of the last time I had a friend for Sunday dinner... it would had to have been before I left for Hogwarts, if even then.”

“Your father threatened me with several Sunday dinners,” Harry reported. “I think they believe I have some kind of unnatural hold over you – something about your ‘attitude toward me’, or the like.”

Hermione said in a low voice, “Excuse me?”

“Your mother seemed to think that you required my permission before you were willing to talk to them,” Harry explained.

Her jaw tightened and lips pursed. “She doesn’t think that I make my own choices?” Hermione growled. “We’ll just see about that!” She started for the door, but Harry tightened his loose hold around her waist.

“What are you...?” she protested.

“Save it for dinner,” he joked.

“You actually want to go through with dinner?” she asked.

“Gryffindors stick together, right? Besides, your parents may be trying to surprise you. I can’t very well interfere with their plan,” Harry said.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Hermione admitted. “I wonder if they intend to invite anyone else. I can’t imagine – I mean, it’s Sunday dinner after all.”

Harry shrugged. “It sounded like they were fairly intent on getting to know me – whatever that may involve. No one else was mentioned.”

Hermione frowned. “As long as they don’t invite Ron...” Before Harry could interject, she cut him off and continued, “I’m sorry, Harry – I’ve just had enough for now. If you want to help him, I won’t interfere. As I see it, he can go and bugger –”

“Hermione!” he exclaimed.

“ – or flail away at Lavender Brown... whatever he wants, as long as he stays away from me,” she snarled, and pulled away.

“Enough with Ron,” he said. “You were the one who brought him up, not me.”

“Sorry,” she muttered as she turned her attention back to the books. “Thank you for allowing me to keep the library here for the time being. I haven’t decided how I’ll go about reading everything. I suppose I’ll take home a few books to start?”

Harry offered, “It should be easier after you sort through all the material, right? I mean, you did say that sorting would cut it in half.”

“You didn’t believe that rot, did you?” she muttered without looking up from the table.

Harry’s eyes widened and he said, “I’m sorry?”

Hermione turned, and the mischievous smile was back. It was a smile he would have associated with the Weasley twins, not Hermione. “Sirius was the one who told me to break a few rules and loosen up. So, I’ve decided to start with his library. I’m not binning anything without at least looking it over. If anything proves truly dangerous, I’ll hand it over to Madam Pince for the Hogwarts restricted section.”

She set her hand on one of the larger stacks of books. “I put these aside for you to review. They all deal with advanced defensive work, and I’ve only heard of two of them. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all,” Harry said. “It might help prepare me for the fall.” He glanced at the spines of the stacked books. “Some of these certainly look intriguing... ‘Scandalous Tactics for Duelling’? What, do I need more scandal in my life?”

Harry didn’t notice that Hermione had put her arm around him until after he read all the book titles. She didn’t seem remotely self-conscious about it. He felt that it should bother him, though he wasn’t certain why.

He turned toward her, and she put her other arm around him. "This seems a little out of order for best friends, doesn't it?" Harry asked nervously.

"I don't know," she answered, "I'm just making this up as I go."

Harry froze. "What did you dream last night?" he asked haltingly.

Hermione blushed faintly and let go of him. "I told you it was probably just a result of the safeguarding charm," she said. "It was nothing."

"Hermione!" Mr. Granger's voice carried up the stairs. "It's time to leave! Our ride is here!"

"Could you help me with some of these books?" Hermione asked. "I want to take these two stacks home. That should tide me over for a while." Harry picked up a large stack of books as he was directed, and followed her down the stairs to the entry hall. Mr. and Mrs. Granger were waiting by the door.

"You're taking all those books home?" Mrs. Granger asked.

"It's just some light reading," Hermione claimed. Harry groaned, and shifted the weight of the dozen thick books he carried for her.

There was a nondescript car in front of the house. Harry was reminded of the cars used by the Ministry. A young, thickly built man who Harry did not know sat behind the wheel. Seeing Harry coming, the driver reached down toward his feet and the boot popped open. Shacklebolt stood by the open rear door of the car and silently observed. Lupin stood on the front stoop, and kept a careful eye on the neighbouring houses. Harry lowered the books into the boot, and then shook his arms to restore the flow of blood. Hermione placed her smaller stack of books into the boot as well.

Harry said to her, "You know that you're always welcome to study here in the library. I'll make sure that Dobby knows to admit you."

Sensing Mr. Granger watching, he hastily added, "And your parents as well, of course."

Hermione smiled. "That's perfect. It would be much easier, to be sure, and then I could organize and read all at once." She stared at her mother, who was climbing into the back seat of the car, and added loudly, "I'm certain my parents would find that amenable."

Harry closed the boot and walked Hermione around the sedan. Her parents were very obviously watching them from inside the car. Hermione stopped and turned toward Harry. "I'll return your clothes straight away," she said. Shacklebolt stopped looking around and stared at Harry; one eyebrow slowly climbed.

Hermione stopped at the door. "Thank you for taking care of me last night," she said, then hugged him tightly, and planted a lingering kiss on his cheek. Harry stood completely still, in order to avoid betraying his mounting panic. What in the hell are you doing, Hermione? he thought. Harry turned away from the car very quickly, as Mr. Granger reddened and spluttered. Half of him resented being used as a pawn; the other half was too overwhelmed to care.

"Potter!" Shacklebolt barked.

Harry turned back again slowly. "Yes?"

Shacklebolt said tersely, "Here, at eight o'clock tomorrow morning. Don't disappoint me." He swept back his cloak and clambered into the front passenger seat of the car, which swiftly pulled away from number twelve, Grimmauld Place.

Harry drifted down the walk to the front door. Lupin still stood on the front stoop. "I see Kingsley's been talked into teaching you," he said.

"It looks that way – I know he's none too happy about it," Harry observed.

"That was an interesting end to your time with Hermione. Perhaps the two of you did need a chaperone last night?" he laughed.

Harry sighed. "You don't recognize a sham when you see one?"

"What do you mean by 'a sham'?" Lupin asked.

"She's furious with her parents. Hermione wouldn't behave that way; she was making a point," Harry explained.

Lupin sighed and shook his head. "If that's how you see it..." he said.

Shortly, Harry retired to the library and took the top book from the stack of defensive texts. He was going to have an angry tutor, which meant that it would be very wise and very practical to spend the remainder of the evening preparing for their first session.

After two hours of continuous reading, Harry stopped to stretch. He caught sight of the wrapped painting from Dudley. There were a few finishing nails in the library walls, where presumably evil artwork had been removed. Harry unwrapped the painting, found a well-lit spot, and balanced the canvas on a nail. He wasn't sure why he was so taken with the image – there was just something about it.

He was still looking at the painting, when Lupin entered the library. "Taking a stretch?" Lupin asked. "This would be a good time to break for dinner."

"That sounds grand," Harry said. "My eyes are burning."

"Find anything useful?" Lupin wondered.

Harry grinned. "Absolutely, yes – some of these jinxes are vicious. I'll have a few surprises in store for Shackbolt, I think."

Lupin walked toward the painting on the wall. "I see you've hung it here. Not planning on putting it in your room, then?"

"This room could use some colour," Harry said. "I'll leave it here for now."

Lupin gazed at the painting and stroked his chin. "Is it sunrise or sunset, Harry?" he asked.

Harry considered that at length. "I don't know," he decided.

Chapter Eleven

POTTER TRAINING

August 2, 1996

Harry pored over each of the books that Hermione had selected for him, and then he tore through the shelves looking for more. He took laborious notes, complete with sketches and diagrams. He studied and practiced and practiced and studied until his hand was sore from gripping his quill and his eyes burned with fatigue. He stumbled up to his room, fell face down onto his bed, and then dragged himself up with the sun.

His book binge began because he was unwilling to be humiliated by Shacklebolt, but it was spurred on by fascination. The books that Hermione had set out for him weren't textbooks – they were practical manuals for the art and science of war. MacLachlan had trained Aurors a few decades earlier, and Harry wondered if he might have trained Mad-Eye Moody. *Chronicles of the Goblin Wars* by von Lichtenstein described everything from military campaigns to brutal hand-to-hand combat.

Scandalous Tactics for Duelling was Harry's hands-down favourite, however. The Marquis de Maupassant was witty, direct, and utterly reprehensible. The book reminded him in a way of Devlin Whitehorn's manual for the Bonneville; it was written as much for the Marquis' enjoyment as for the reader. It was clear that de Maupassant had held no respect for the codes that governed wizards' duels and felt that any reader should share his opinion.

Lupin appeared at the door, pale and bleary-eyed, at around half past seven. "Harry, I consider myself a patient man, but what – is – causing – all – that – banging?" he bellowed.

Harry winced. "I'm sorry, Remus," he said. "I didn't think about the fact that they were hitting the floor. They didn't, at first."

"What are 'they'? What in the devil are you talking about?" Lupin demanded.

Harry flicked his wand, and a silver ball the size of a large grapefruit appeared in mid-air. It fell to the floor with a clank! before it dissipated. "Cannon shot," he burbled. "I was reading von Lichtenstein's book about the Goblin Wars: the part where he discusses a shortage of cannon shot. It really grabbed me; magical cannons – who would have thought? Anyway, he talked about the problems with conjuring more shot – you know, making it sufficiently dense and smooth, making it last long enough to impact the target, that sort of thing? I've laboured a bit with transfiguration and I've never managed effective conjuring before, but this just made sense to me somehow."

"You've been dropping cannon shot on my ceiling since seven o'clock!" Lupin fumed. "In future, please wait until nine o'clock to begin a siege!" With that, he stomped off.

Harry switched from conjuring cannon shot to lengths of rope – the Marquis described more than two dozen questionable ways to use rope against an opponent, in graphic and sometimes side-splitting detail. He experimented with two of them and was ready to move on to a third when he heard Dobby offer greetings at the front door. Shacklebolt swept in, followed by Tonks and Hermione.

Harry hadn't expected to see two of the three. "Good morning, Tonks," Harry said; he added uneasily, "Good morning, Hermione."

Hermione's reply was terse. "Good morning, Harry. I've come to use the library, as we discussed yesterday," she said. She looked tired, he thought, and he wondered if the three Grangers had talked well into the night.

"Of course; have at it," Harry offered. "I left a bit of a mess, I'm afraid. I was going through the stack of books that you left for me."

Hermione began to reply but Shacklebolt ordered, "Tonks, go to the library with Miss Granger – now. Potter has his first lesson to learn."

Tonks glared at him. "I'm sure that Dumbledore wouldn't mind if you took this slowly," she said.

“Dumbledore made his feelings abundantly clear,” Shacklebolt said flatly. “Go.” Hermione stood hesitantly until Tonks nudged her toward the stairs. Harry gripped the tip of his wand between the fingers of his right hand; the body of the wand ran up his sleeve.

As soon as Hermione and Tonks were out of sight, Shacklebolt told Harry, “It’s time for your first lesson. It’s essential, and I expect you’ll remember it well. Everbero!”

A red beam of light shot toward Harry, who managed to shout ‘Contego!’ in time to partially block the spell. The remaining energy struck him in the shoulder like the hardest punch he could imagine. He flew backward and slammed against the foot of the stairs.

Harry muttered, “Creo rope”, jabbed his wand toward Shacklebolt, and then shouted, “Evincio!”; a newly conjured rope wound and tightened around the auror’s legs. Shacklebolt toppled and barely missed Harry with a stunning spell. Harry forced himself up the stairs against the painful protests of his shoulder.

He nearly crashed into Lupin, who snarled, “More cannon shot, is it? What will it take to make you stop?” A flash of light shot up the stairs, and punched a hole in the ceiling plaster.

Lupin instantly produced his wand, and conjured a small mirror. He eased the mirror around the edge of the stairwell, which drew another red flash. “Kingsley, what in Merlin’s name are you doing?” he shouted.

“Back off, Lupin,” Shacklebolt warned; “Don’t interfere with Potter’s training.”

“I’ll damn well interfere if you’re going to destroy the house!” Lupin yelled. “Shacklebolt! Shacklebolt – answer me!” Lupin sniffed the air and spun around just as Shacklebolt appeared.

“Petrificus totalus,” Shacklebolt muttered, and Lupin’s stunning spell missed by inches. “There’s my answer,” he added. Lupin immediately

began rocking back and forth on the floor as he tried to counter the spell.

Shacklebolt slowly moved toward the drawing room. "Let's see... if I were an arrogant whelp, where would I be hiding?" he wondered aloud. Harry had Disillusioned himself and had cast silencing charms all around to mask his laboured breathing. He stood perfectly still as Shacklebolt entered the drawing room and passed within a foot of him.

Shacklebolt looked around the room. "He's taken the O.W.L.s so he could have vanished himself, but that wouldn't be the wisest choice inside these wards," he lectured. "I'm fairly certain that he knows the Disillusionment charm. Any worthy teenager would think to silence the floorboards... there's one thing I'm betting you didn't hide, Potter." He said "Lumos!", and pointed his wand along the wall where Harry stood.

Harry realised too late that although Disillusioned, he still cast a shadow in bright light. Shacklebolt snarled, "Percutio!" The ex-Auror blasted a Galleon-sized hole in the wall with each flick of his wrist; sharp bits of plaster sprayed everywhere. Harry dove for the doorway, and bounced against the floor with a noisy squeak. Shacklebolt said, "Finite incantatum," and Harry knew he was again visible. He scrambled awkwardly for the stairs.

"The floor squeaked, Potter. Obviously you've never snuck into a young lady's house," Shacklebolt said. He strode onto the stairs and added menacingly, "I'm coming for you. Show me something, schoolboy."

Harry stood back from the open stairwell, and waited. Tonks called down from above, "Kingsley, he's not an Auror-in-training. He hasn't even studied N.E.W.T.-level spells, to speak of. Dumbledore would never approve of this."

"Dumbledore said I could select my own methods. I'll let up after this lesson," Shacklebolt called from below, "if he proves worthy of it."

Tonks came down the steps and crept toward Harry. The floor didn't squeak when she walked, he noticed. She whispered, "You're bleeding. Just give up and end this; I'll train you up, if it comes to that."

Harry followed her gaze and touched his own face. He felt blood and pinpoint cuts from the flying plaster. His cloak was tattered where the first spell had struck him and his back was tightening. Harry shook his head from side to side by way of response; he locked his gaze on the stairs.

Tonks said, "What is it with men? I hope you have something planned, then." She tiptoed back to the ascending stairs. Harry heard Hermione engage Tonks in a stream of angry whispers that he couldn't make out. In the midst of that, he heard a tap from the descending stairs. When he muttered 'Finite incantatum', the top of Shacklebolt's head came into view through the gaps in the railing.

Harry madly flicked his wand toward the space above the open stairs and called out over and over, "Creo cannon shot!" Silver balls appeared in mid-air above Shacklebolt's head like popcorn popping, and the stairwell echoed with the sound of wooden stairs splintering. Shacklebolt ran up instead of down, which Harry hadn't expected. He managed to bat away a half-dozen balls, but one struck him on the side of the head and another slammed into his shoulder as he fell forward.

Harry said, "Accio wand," and Shacklebolt's wand flew into his hand.

Tonks demanded, "Kingsley, put a stop to this, now!" She started down the stairs again.

Shacklebolt whipped a second wand from his cloak, and quickly called out, "Expelliarmus! Accio glasses! Aduro cloak!" Harry moved to one side but his glasses flew off and the bottom of his cloak burst into flames. He recalled the extinguishing spell that the dragon keepers used during the Triwizard Tournament, and put out the fire before anything save the ruined cloak was burned. He couldn't see anything clearly, including his wand, but he could make out that Shacklebolt had clambered to his feet and that Tonks was nearby.

Shacklebolt ground his foot against the floor and there was a crunching sound. So much for my glasses, Harry thought.

Hermione forcefully whispered from the ascending stairs, "Get up here!"

"My wand..." Harry muttered as he groped along the floor.

"It fell down the stairs. He's gone mad! Get up here now, before he really hurts you!" Hermione insisted.

Tonks shouted, "Enough of this!" She exchanged a flurry of spells with Shacklebolt, punctuated by muttering and snarling that Harry couldn't follow. Harry tried to stand but his back seized up. He felt an invisible hand grasp his and found himself sliding along the floor toward the nearest bedroom. Once inside, the door closed.

"Colloportus!" called Hermione's voice just before she reappeared. The door squeaked tightly shut. "This must qualify as self-defence," she explained.

Explosions rattled outside, and they heard Shacklebolt's muffled voice. "Hello, Lupin – nicely done. I apologise for the next bit in advance," he said. More bangs and reports followed, and then Tonks cried out. After more booms and crunches, Lupin bellowed something like "Aaargh!" The door to the bedroom rattled and shook.

"You didn't get the pieces of my glasses, did you?" Harry asked quietly.

"I was otherwise occupied," Hermione snapped.

"This door is well sealed, Miss Granger," Shacklebolt called from the hallway. "Perhaps I should be training you instead? I'll admit that the metal balls were creative, Potter; you'll have to pay for that." The door blew off its hinges; it barely missed Hermione and smashed a tall, ornate side table into pieces.

Shacklebolt was standing in the doorway. “Somnio!” he shouted. Hermione yawned and slid gently to the floor before she had a chance to raise her wand.

Shacklebolt held Tonks by the collar with his free hand. She struggled in his grasp; her wrists and ankles were bound. “What in the hell are you playing at?” she shouted.

Shacklebolt’s eyes blazed at Harry. “Do you understand your first lesson, Potter? Do you? Death Eaters don’t duel like a bunch of pureblood pansies at a society party. Death Eaters attack first, and they kill. If you’d understood that in June, we’d all be a lot happier now – wouldn’t we? Wouldn’t we?”

Harry stood and squinted at Shacklebolt. “What do you want from me – another apology?” he demanded. “I’m sorry! I got Sirius killed, right? Ron is probably going mad because of me! Tonks and Hermione were badly hurt. Do you think I could feel any worse? I get it! Put a stop to this and let Tonks go.”

Shacklebolt said, “You’re quite good at getting other people to sacrifice themselves on your behalf. I think we’ll move on to your second lesson. I am You-Know-Who and you are Harry Potter. It seems I’ve got your little friend here, Potter. She’s defenceless and so are you. What do you think I’m going to do... don’t try it, Lupin – you know that I can drop you where you stand.”

“End this, Kingsley. End it now,” Lupin said in a strangled voice.

Shacklebolt went on. “I’m Voldemort, Potter! What do you think I’m going to do to your friend? She’s just Mudblood filth in my eyes –”

“Kingsley! Don’t use that word!” Tonks shouted, as she continued to struggle.

“Out with it, Potter! What do you think I’m going to do with a trifle like Granger? Hand her off to my minions, perhaps? Maybe I’ll just kill her slowly while you watch.” Harry stiffened at the mention of Hermione’s name. It’s a game, he reminded himself, a nasty one, but

a game all the same. He won't hurt Tonks; he's just angry with me. He took slow breaths, but the room still closed in on him – it was stifling.

“Kingsley, you're going to make Harry angry. I don't recommend that,” Lupin warned.

“Aw, does baby Potter have a little control problem?” Shacklebolt mocked, affecting a voice that was too much like Bellatrix Lestrange for Harry to stomach. Harry wiped sweat from his brow. He thought, there has to be an option - think!

“It's not a little problem,” Tonks said, her wrists moving back and forth in quick bursts. “I take it that you didn't hear about his aunt and uncle's cellar?”

“What are you going to do now, Potter – swear at me? You don't have many alternatives from which to choose,” Shacklebolt sneered. Harry wiped away more sweat. Try as he might, he couldn't squint hard enough to make out Shacklebolt's face – just the shape of his head and the golden glint of his earring.

“Kingsley, I'll give the next lesson,” Tonks said. She pulled her wrists apart, rammed her elbow into Shacklebolt's stomach, and stomped hard on his foot. “Never make assumptions about the damsel in distress!” she shouted. Shacklebolt nearly lost hold of his wand but he managed to gasp out ‘Expuli’ and Tonks slammed hard into the wall.

Shacklebolt turned his attention to Hermione, who was sound asleep. “Aha! The real damsel!” he said.

Harry dove across the bed, falling into the remnants of the shattered side table. He groped along the floor, in the hope that Hermione's wand might be loose. He felt a long wooden cylinder roll beneath his hand, grasped it tightly, and sprang to his feet.

“What do you think you’re going to do with that?” Shacklebolt laughed. Hermione slowly slid across the floor toward him. The sweat dripped into Harry’s eyes and it stung. He blinked hard and saw the glint of gold again. It was suddenly very clear what he needed to do.

“Accio earring!” he hissed.

Shacklebolt screamed as the hoop tore through his earlobe and flew toward Harry’s outstretched hand. Instead of running away, Harry charged him. He shoved Shacklebolt – who was shrieking and clutching at his ear – hard into the wall opposite the doorway.

Shacklebolt instinctively crouched, and Harry did precisely as Dudley had instructed him: he pounded at his opponent’s abdomen with crisp, hard blows. He swung upward and connected firmly with the auror’s jaw, whose head snapped back. With one more blow, Shacklebolt lay sprawled on the floor of the corridor.

“Expelliarmus!” Harry shouted, and Shacklebolt’s wand shot down the hallway. “The lesson’s over,” he spat.

Lupin sat propped against the wall a few feet away. “Pray that you’re never near me during a full moon, Shacklebolt,” he croaked.

“Good show, Harry – serves him right. I just want to know how you pulled it off,” Tonks called out from the bedroom. “Are you taking after Moody, hiding wand cores inside everything?”

“Wand cores? What are you on about?” Harry asked. He looked around in confusion. With effort, the wooden cylinder in his hand came into focus: it was a broken table leg. He dropped it as though it had stung him.

“Potter,” Shacklebolt murmured, “you should have used plural from the beginning.”

“Wha –?” Harry began.

There was yet another wand in Shacklebolt's hand; he muttered 'Percussum' and swept his wand from one side to the other. Harry felt like a giant open hand slapped him across the face, and fell hard onto his sore shoulder.

"You should have said 'Accio wands', not 'Accio wand'," Shacklebolt said as he crawled toward Harry. "Never walk away from an opponent unless or until you are dead certain he's finished." He leaned in, his face inches from Harry's, and snarled, "Your last lesson for today is this, Potter – the lesson is over when I say so."

Shacklebolt collected his earring from the floor and slowly rose. "You will diagram this entire sequence of events, every element of it. For each element, you will prepare an analysis. You will summarize by writing two feet on how you would defeat me, given the same circumstances," he ordered. "We will review your work tomorrow at eight, and we train at nine."

Lupin rose to his feet behind Shacklebolt, and jabbed the tip of his wand hard against the former auror's neck. "Going somewhere?"

"Apparently not," Shacklebolt murmured.

"You have a good deal of repairing ahead of you, followed by a great deal of explaining. If I decide to let you live, then you will explain yourself to Albus; tomorrow will be up to him, won't it?" growled Lupin.

Harry wiped blood from the corner of his mouth. "I believe that's up to me," he said firmly.

Hermione came out of the bedroom. She became aware of her surroundings as though coming out of a fog, and Tonks steadied her. "Harry!" she cried; "Look what he did to you." She gently placed her hand on his face and he flinched at the pain. Then, she turned and stared down Shacklebolt.

"You should be very glad that I'm underage!" Hermione raged. "What kind of a teacher are you?"

“Want to hex me, do you? Keep in mind that I used a sleeping spell when I could have stunned you, or worse,” Shacklebolt said. Lupin pulled back slightly but kept his wand pointed at Shacklebolt’s head.

Tonks shouted, “I thought we were going to be cleaning Harry off the walls, for Merlin’s sake!”

“I held my own,” Harry insisted. He said to Shacklebolt, “Tomorrow morning, then,” which drew a curt nod.

Hermione gaped at Harry. “Please tell me you’re joking!”

Lupin added sternly, “You should discuss this with Dumbledore before committing to anything.”

“I’ve made my decision,” said Harry.

“Look at what Mr. Shacklebolt has done to Harry Potter’s house!” Dobby squeaked from the stairs. He slowly walked down the hallway, looking from side to side, and then up and down. “Plaster... paint... wallpaper... trim... doors... terrible!” he fumed.

“I’ve ordered Kingsley to begin making repairs,” Lupin explained to Dobby.

Dobby stopped in front of Harry. He looked at Harry’s face and cloak and began to shake. “That – will – not – be – necessary,” the house-elf blustered. “Dobby will make the repairs. Dobby can repair faster and better.” He immediately reached toward Harry’s face.

“Would everyone please stop touching my face?” Harry asked. “It hurts!”

“Harry Potter will stop moving, please,” Dobby said. “Dobby will begin the repairs with Harry Potter.” In a few moments, Harry’s face no longer stung.

“I didn’t know that house-elves could heal,” Lupin said, impressed.

Tonks said, "Well-treated house-elves can manage basic healing if they're asked, but I've never seen it done without prompting... I've never seen house-elves do much of anything without prompting, beyond cleaning and the like."

Hermione said smugly, "You obviously haven't seen free house-elves, then," and then proceeded to give a brief primer on house-elf liberation. Tonks buried her face in her hands, Shacklebolt was clearly puzzled, Lupin smiled and shook his head, and Dobby rolled his enormous eyes.

Dobby then turned his attention to Shacklebolt. "May Dobby escort Mr. Shacklebolt to the door?" he squeaked menacingly.

"That won't be necessary," Shacklebolt said.

"It would be best that you leave," Lupin said.

"There are supposed to be three Order members near Miss Granger at all times," Shacklebolt noted.

"You weren't exactly on protective duty this morning," Tonks snapped, "nor was I, thanks to your idea of a lesson."

"I'd say Harry would be more useful in a pinch than Mundungus Fletcher or Diggle," Lupin added. "With Tonks and me, that makes three. Good-bye, Kingsley. Sadly, I'll see you tomorrow."

"I really do think —" Shacklebolt started.

"Dobby, please show Mr. Shacklebolt out," Hermione said in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Does Harry Potter have instructions for Dobby if Mr. Shacklebolt should resist?" Dobby asked Harry; the grin on his face was quite like Winky's murderous expression when she had spoken of Kreacher.

Harry blurted out, "Be sure that you don't kill him, please."

Shacklebolt began walking backward toward the stairs. "Easy, now," he said to Dobby. "House-elves can't kill..." He held his wand out slightly in a defensive posture. Dobby reached out a hand, waggled his fingers, and Shacklebolt's remaining wand flew to him; he neatly snapped it in half and tossed the pieces aside.

Shacklebolt stopped halfway down the flight of stairs, and said, "You don't have to turn me out. Clearly, you don't –"

Dobby raced down the stairs and exclaimed repeatedly, "You are resisting, sir!"

Shacklebolt called out, "Tomorrow morning, Potter! Be prepared!" Harry heard the thump-squeak-thump-squeak of a person racing down the stairs, and then a loud pop! that was quickly followed by the slamming of the front door.

"I don't think I'm prepared for free house-elves," Tonks muttered.

"I'm entirely unprepared for Shacklebolt to return to this house," Lupin said firmly, arms tightly crossed.

"I agree," Hermione added. "Harry, he could have killed you."

"I thought that my intentions about tomorrow were clear," Harry said.

"Training-by-ambush seems completely out of bounds to me," Lupin observed.

Tonks shrugged. "That's how it's done, Remus. By Auror School standards, Kingsley was fairly controlled. I just thought he was over the top given Harry's inexperience – no offence intended, of course."

"That was consistent with Auror training?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"More or less," Tonks answered. "He's cross with Harry, and that sort of bias would ordinarily be forbidden in practicals. Still... on the

main, I would have to say that combat training is the hardest thing I've ever done."

"He didn't treat me like a child," Harry said.

"Definitely not," Tonks agreed. "He treated you the way that he treats trainees. Believe me, I know. Kingsley was my combat tactics trainer, and he can be a nasty, filthy, hard-nosed son of a..."

Lupin cut her off. "Tonks!"

"You think I'm off? I see the evidence in our midst," Tonks chuckled, gesturing toward Harry. Lupin frowned.

Hermione looked Harry up and down, and sighed. "Are you sure about this? You look like... let's just say that you've looked better."

"You know what I'm up against," Harry said. Hermione suddenly looked out of sorts, and Harry felt... something. He looked at the back of his hand and quickly added, "That is, you've seen everything I've faced over the last five years. I need real training, not the school work at Hogwarts." Hermione relaxed, and he resolved to force Dumbledore to explain the safeguard – he was the 'Bearer' after all, whatever that meant.

"Steady there, Harry," Tonks said. "You're really whipped without those glasses, eh?"

"Just wondering what's left of them," Harry mumbled.

Hermione dashed in front of him, and gathered up some fragments. "I'm not sure that these can be repaired," she said. "The right lens has been ground practically to dust."

"Let me have a go at them," Lupin said. He crouched down to peer at the remains of Harry's glasses. Instead of attempting to repair them all at once, he reconstructed one portion at a time. "Here, give them a try," he said, holding out the mended glasses.

Harry gripped his glasses by the hinges, and slowly slid them on. He backed them away twice, blinking furiously, before he settled the frames on his face. "Thank you for the effort, Remus, but they're not right. Everything looks curved."

Lupin frowned. "You'll need new ones, then. I suppose it's been quite some time since you've had your eyes properly looked after, anyway. Backup pairs would be in order, I'd say – three or four of them, perhaps."

"An Unbreakable Charm would be a good precaution as well," Tonks added.

Hermione shook her head. "How many times have I suggested that?" she chided him.

Harry just smiled. "I'm going upstairs for a bit," he announced.

When he nearly missed the first step, Hermione said, "I'll go with you."

Harry took off his glasses. "Better off without them for the moment, I think. I'll be fine now."

Hermione began, "Are you sure? I mean, I –"

Harry waved her off. "I'll be fine. I'm going to tidy myself up a bit. Meet you in the library, then?"

"Where else would I be?" she said. Harry wished that he could match her expression to her strained tone, but it was enough that he could find the steps.

In the bathroom, Harry peered into the mirror from a few inches away. Half his face was dotted with spatters of blood. Although the nicks and cuts were gone, his cheek was reddened and there was certain to be some kind of bruise later from Shacklebolt's slapping spell at the end. He slipped off his charred cloak and dropped it in a heap,

and his sweat-soaked shirt quickly joined the cloak. He filled the washbasin, found a cloth, and began dabbing at his face.

“You really are a sight,” Lupin said from the doorway to the bathroom.

Harry jabbed the cloth hard against his cheek. “Ouch! Damn it, you startled me!” he cried out.

“Language, Harry,” Lupin scolded. “I just thought that someone should look in on you.”

Harry turned his attention back to removing the blood spatters from his face. “Surprised it wasn’t Hermione,” he muttered.

“She seems peeved with you,” Lupin observed. “Tonks is with her.”

“Peeved with me?” Harry protested. “Who was using whom yesterday?”

Lupin shrugged. “Why don’t you tell me?”

Harry set the cloth atop the washbasin, and glared at Lupin – or in the direction of Lupin’s blurry image, at any rate. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You wouldn’t have minded what she did, if it had taken place on your terms,” Lupin said.

Harry shook his head, and returned to his task. “That’s ridiculous,” he insisted.

Lupin began, “I saw the way that she looked at you last evening, when you were asleep. She –”

Harry stopped him. “When I was ... you saw me asleep? Where – in my bed?”

“No, leant across the sofa,” Lupin explained. “It’s a wonder that you didn’t fall to the floor.”

“Then why did...? I’m confused,” Harry admitted.

“Hermione awoke and fetched me around three o’clock. She couldn’t rouse you and didn’t want to leave you like that. I floated you into bed, and returned to my room,” Lupin said.

“And Hermione...?” Harry asked.

“Went to the guestroom, I imagine,” Lupin answered. “She’s a remarkable young woman, but surely you know that.” Harry smiled strangely.

“You’re amused by that?” Lupin asked. “After what she did for you, you could at least acknowledge –”

Harry shook his head. “No, no, I agree with you. I just... I thought that I remembered last evening a bit differently.”

Lupin crossed his arms. “Do you care to explain yourself?”

“I mistook a dream for something else; no need for panic,” Harry assured him.

“You’re dreaming about her, then?” Lupin asked, his right eyebrow rising slightly.

Harry snorted. “It’s not like that, for goodness’ sake!”

“Judging by the colour of your face, I’d venture that it’s slightly like that,” Lupin smirked.

Harry examined his red cheeks in the mirror. “That’s from Shackbolt,” he determined.

“Are you angry with her, then – about yesterday?” Lupin asked.

Harry brushed past Lupin and walked across the corridor to his bedroom in search of fresh clothing. "Are you baiting me?" he asked Lupin absently.

"I'm simply trying to ascertain your feelings," Lupin answered dispassionately. "Tonks thinks... erm, I think that you seem rather... I don't know, confused?"

Harry found another of the boxing singlets that he'd set aside when Dobby had turned out his old clothes. "I'm not confused in the slightest," he insisted. "I know exactly how I feel."

"And...?" Lupin said expectantly.

Harry passed in front of Lupin and re-entered the bathroom. "That's my business," he said, suppressing a smile. "What's with Tonks, by the way?" he added, feigning innocence.

"Excuse me?" Lupin said in a low voice.

" 'Tonks is with Hermione.' 'Tonks thinks this.' 'Tonks thinks that.' What's with Tonks, then?" Harry asked. He couldn't allow himself to look at Lupin for fear that he'd laugh, but he angled to one side in hopes of catching some of Lupin's expression in the mirror.

"There's nothing whatever with Tonks," Lupin said hastily. "I believe we were talking about you."

"You were talking about me," Harry corrected him. "I'm talking about you. Tonks is definitely on your mind." He kept his back to Lupin. One snort escaped him, and he quickly clapped his hand over his mouth.

"Who's baiting whom here?" Lupin chuckled.

Harry turned around, and burst out laughing. "You win," he snorted.

A broad smile spread across Lupin's face. "Let's call it a draw," he said. Harry did enjoy making Lupin smile. It was relatively rare, and

Harry thought that a smile took ten years off the man. At the same time, those smiles made Harry feel a tinge of something deep inside that he simply couldn't name. When Lupin smiled, Harry began to feel serious – for whatever reason.

“I'm sorry that I disturbed you this morning,” Harry offered.

Lupin scowled a little, and then softened. “I'm on edge – you're not responsible for that. It's just that... dash it all, Harry, no more secrets. I'm not well, not at all. I've had to discontinue the Wolfsbane potion. The last two full moons have been... well, they've been the worst I've known in a very long time.”

Harry's heart sank. “Why did you have to stop the potion...?” He stopped abruptly. Five years' worth of suspicion and enmity welled up inside of him. “Snape,” he added venomously. “This was his doing, wasn't it?”

Lupin held his hands up to pre-empt Harry. “No, Harry – it's quite the contrary. If anything, the fact that I tolerated the potion for this long is a testament to his skills. We've learned that few of my kind can take it for an extended period. Snape gave me several good years; in fact, he holds out some hope that I may be able to resume it in time. Despite what you think of him – despite what he thinks of me, for that matter – I choose to be grateful.”

“The room downstairs... you needed extra reinforcement,” Harry realised.

Lupin nodded sadly. “Tonks helped me to prepare it. She's been a great comfort to me the last few weeks, though it's hard for me to imagine her motives.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

Lupin sighed. “You see past my nature,” he said, “and that's also a great comfort – but Tonks has... she has seen me.” He shuddered. “She knows everything now, the full horror of it.”

Harry said gently, "I suppose that she sees past your nature as well."

Lupin tensed. "Perhaps she does... or perhaps she's simply naïve. Sweet Merlin, she's scarcely past her school days. She shouldn't be messing about with anyone fifteen years older than she is, let alone..." He sighed. "I keep explaining to her that she's been toying with something terribly dangerous... she could be killed – or much worse."

Harry stepped forward and rested his hand on Lupin's arm. "Dumbledore trusted you to teach, and I'm sure that he still does. Hermione... I think that she respects you more than any other professor that she's had. I choose to be here with you, and nothing that you could do would change my mind."

"I've succumbed to Sirius' choice in that matter, but that doesn't mean I concurred," Lupin growled. "I don't want anyone else hurt because of me."

Harry shrugged. "We've all made our choices. You may as well accept that."

Lupin's sad, gentle eyes bored into Harry. He said haltingly, "You mean well, Harry, I truly believe that... but... you're actually telling me that I should accept the willingness of others to risk injury on my behalf? You must surely sense the irony in that."

Harry's first impulse was to insist that their situations were different, that the nature of the danger surrounding Harry was more unmanageable. He knew that wasn't true, of course – especially now that Lupin could no longer rely on the one measure of control that had been available to him.

Instead, Harry simply asked, "Feeling helpless is horrible, isn't it?"

Lupin nodded, his eyes closed. "Of all the things that we could possibly share in common, you and I – why does it have to be that?"

Harry finished cleaning his face, and fussed with his hair to little avail. They retired to the library, which he had decided was the most

comfortable room in the house, and started a magical fire; it was too warm for the real thing. He was so tired – tired from the reading, tired from the day's lesson, tired from all the changes – just tired. Seated on the sofa and without his glasses, it was very easy to lose himself in the green flickering flames.

Lupin browsed through several books before he broke the silence. "I'm not certain how to bring this up, so I'll just spit it out. I do intend to take on fully my responsibilities toward you and the Black Trust, and to that end I've been studying the finances. I've stumbled across a few things that concern me. For example, it turns out that Diggle was appointed as the Black trustee nearly five years ago. He also held power of attorney over your personal accounts from July 19th until your birthday."

Harry's attention flickered with the flames. "Uh-huh... five years ago... my accounts," he muttered.

"I've also found a number of transactions that make no sense to me, mostly in June and July of this year," Lupin continued. "Most are from the Trust account, but some are from your personal accounts. One is quite large... astoundingly large, actually. It appears to be a transfer of some type, rather than an expense. Frankly, Harry, I'm rather lost in the details. Madam Bones and I have agreed that Ted Tonks should have a go at it, unless you have strong feelings otherwise."

"Uh-huh, Tonks," Harry muttered. "She's fine... whatever you want."

Lupin took on an impish expression when Harry said 'she'. "By the way, Harry... I thought you should know that Tonks is carrying our love child. It's a Labrador retriever, and we've decided to call him Fudge. I trust you'll turn up at the christening, then?"

"Uh-huh... christening," Harry muttered. "Fudge is nice... Fudge? Wha...?" He sat up and stared at Lupin with glassy eyes.

"Just checking whether you were nodding off," Lupin laughed. "Did you hear a word that I said?"

"I certainly did. Fudge is a terrible name, and I can't believe you'd pick a dog without me," Harry complained absently.

Lupin snorted. "Rest for a while," he said. "We'll talk later." Harry saw the flicker of green flames and then nothing at all

He blinked hard, and his eyes watered. The green flickering was still before him, but sideways. The shadows in the room were all wrong... Lupin had been blathering something about dogs, and then... he sat up slowly. Someone sat quietly in one of the armchairs. He didn't need his glasses to make out who it was.

"How do you feel?" Hermione asked.

Harry thought for a moment. "Rested," he replied, and added with a smirk, "You know, if you keep spending your days in my house, people may begin to talk."

"It's a little late to worry about that," Hermione observed. "Tonks told me that I'd received over fifty Howlers by this morning, courtesy of the subscribers to Teen Witch Weekly."

"The Creevey brothers are going to wish I wasn't coming back to Hogwarts... what were they thinking?" Harry fumed.

"The Creeveys? Oh, I suppose that does makes sense," Hermione decided. "I imagine that they did mean well."

"I wonder if everyone on that stupid list is getting the same treatment?" Harry mused. "I certainly hope not." He added hastily, "Not that I want you to get the worst of it... you know what I meant, right?"

"I understand you," Hermione said. "I doubt the Howlers are evenly distributed. After all, this isn't my first time down this road."

Harry cringed, recalling the treatment Hermione received when Rita Skeeter had first linked the two of them. "Obviously, they didn't spend much time putting that list together. They certainly could have spared

some of the grief; it wouldn't have taken much research to cut it in half, or better."

"The girls remaining on the list would probably have received more Howlers," Hermione said flatly.

"I suppose that makes sense. That would have been terrible for you," Harry said. "Fifty is quite enough, I'd say – I can't imagine several times that. I mean, who has to screen all of those posts –"

"What did you say?" Hermione asked quietly.

"I said that fifty Howlers are enough. I would have felt terrible if you'd received hundreds of them, or thousands. As it is, I think that Fred and George should arrange for the replies." Harry sniggered at the thought.

"Who would have remained on the list?" Hermione asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"You said it wouldn't have taken much research to cut it down – who would have remained on the list?" Hermione asked again.

"Are you feeling anxious about something?" Harry asked.

"What...? I'm not anxious. Whatever would make you think that?" Hermione spluttered.

"Your hands are folded in your lap, and you're drumming with your fingers," observed Harry. "You do that when you're anxious, you know, and... and you just feel anxious."

She grasped the armrests of her chair. "I'm not anxious, not in the slightest. It was a simple question, and I would be satisfied with a simple answer. Besides, I have a special responsibility in this area – you do remember what I promised Sirius?"

Harry grimaced as her meaning dawned on him. "You're actually following through with it? There's no need, you know. Sirius was cooped up in this house far too long, if you ask me. What was he thinking, making you responsible for that?"

"I think it was inspired," Hermione said proudly. "I know you as well as anyone does, and you're too thick to take care of the job yourself."

Harry playfully growled at her. "Answer your own question, then – you're the genius here, after all," he said. "Start with the easy ones. Daphne Greengrass? Please!"

"She has certain... assets that at least a few of our housemates seem to favour," Hermione grumbled.

"You mean the ones that she lets halfway out of her top on Hogsmeade weekends?" Harry asked. "Putting those on the positive side of the ledger –"

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Harry!"

"You were the one being catty," Harry noted. "Let's examine the negatives, then – she's a Slytherin; she acts like she's queen of Hogwarts; and her family are probably Death Eaters. Off the list!"

"Good," Hermione said grimly. "No tarts allowed."

"Don't hold back on my account!" Harry chuckled. "Now, who else was on that list...? Lisa Turpin? I don't think so."

"I don't know – she seems nice enough, if a bit quiet," Hermione offered.

"Quiet? The bloody library's loud by comparison! Have you ever listened to her when she does talk? I'll bet she aspires to be Madam Pince," Harry complained.

"You know, a lot of people might say that about me," Hermione said.

Harry's brow furrowed. "Why – because you like books? They don't know you, then. You are very well-read and rather fun. From what I've seen, Lisa Turpin is bookish and boring."

"You think that I'm fun?" Hermione asked, with a note of surprise in her voice.

Harry said, "Sure... well, at least when you're not riding me about my studies... or turning in my Firebolt... or chiding me for one decision or another... did I mention the Firebolt?" He grinned at her.

"So I'm conditionally fun; how charming," Hermione deadpanned. "What about Gretchen Hargrove?"

"She kissed me on the cheek in Gringotts the other day – can you believe that? I scarcely know her; I didn't even recognise her at the time," Harry told her.

"Right - she's the one who was in the Prophet. A researcher might leave her on the list for that alone," Hermione surmised.

"Not if the researcher had bothered to ask me about it," Harry said.

"You said you scarcely know her," Hermione said, "but you have an opinion?"

Harry nodded. "A pale imitation of Ginny," he said.

Hermione's eyebrows rose. "Now who's the catty one?" she asked. "I wouldn't have thought you paid such close attention to the girls at school, honestly. Do you boys have these sorts of conversations up in the dormitory?"

"What, rating the girls? Not in our room at least," Harry answered. "Dean goes on about football when he's not drawing, Seamus has never really been tight with any of us but Dean, and Neville was too timid to even think of chatting up a girl until this spring."

“ ‘Chatting up’? Who are you, and what have you done with Harry Potter?” Hermione laughed.

“That’s what it’s called, right?” said Harry.

Hermione rolled her eyes, and asked, “And what about Ron?”

“Did I talk about girls with Ron?” Harry thought for a moment. “No... we really didn’t. Around the time of the Yule Ball, I suppose we talked a bit – not many other times, though.”

“You’ve no one to talk with about this sort of thing, then?” Hermione asked.

Harry said, “It hasn’t been an issue. It’s not as though I have a dating history, or a little black book like Sirius.”

Hermione’s cheeks coloured. “A little black book? Are you joking?”

“Devlin Whitehorn said that Sirius used to have a woman on each arm most of the time when he was just out of school,” Harry said.

Hermione shook her head. “Why any self-respecting woman would subject herself to that treatment...? Were they foolish or just desperate?”

Harry shrugged. “Dunno... I couldn’t be like he was. Who’s left on the list, then?”

Hermione said, “Let’s see; Ginny, Luna... me... oh, and Cho Chang.”

“We can dispense with Cho,” Harry said quickly.

“You did go out with her,” Hermione noted, “and there was a kiss involved.”

Harry snorted. “It hardly counted. I broke off from her to meet you at the Three Broomsticks, remember? Besides, we both know I was just a stand-in for... you know... anyway, I couldn’t see it then but I do

now.” He couldn’t bring himself to say Cedric’s name, even after more than a year.

“You had quite a crush on her,” Hermione said distantly; “You were attracted to her.”

“I had this idea of who she was,” Harry explained, “but it didn’t match with the real thing. She’s definitely off the list, and that leaves you and Ginny and Luna. See, I told you that the list could easily be cut.”

“You’re going to make this task very difficult for me, aren’t you?” Hermione sighed.

Harry began, “Which task...? Oh, no, are we back to the ‘true love’ business? Look, I told you that don’t have to – ”

“I promised him,” Hermione said, “and just because the parchment is gone doesn’t change the fact. You certainly won’t manage it. You’ll never think about it, and if something happens...” She stopped, and seemed to gather herself. “I’m doing this for you, and that decision is final. The challenge will be in determining what you want, because you obviously have no idea.”

“Oh, thank you very much! Of course I know what I want!” Harry huffed.

“You haven’t a clue, Harry,” Hermione insisted. “You wouldn’t know love if it snuck up from behind and bit you, so I’ll have to ensure that it’s made simple for you.”

“This should be charming,” Harry moaned; “I can see it now – you’ll have some kind of scoring system, with rankings and averages and all the information ever... what?”

Hermione was crimson. “What’s wrong with a scoring system?” she snapped. “It’s an excellent approach to ensure unbiased and accurate results.”

Harry buried his face in his hands. "You've already started it, haven't you?" he muttered.

"There's not a lot to do, trapped in one's own house," she complained. "I ran out of schoolwork weeks ago. At least I have some useful reading now." I know a bit about being trapped in the summer, Harry thought, but he remained silent.

Hermione stood up. "We should go downstairs. Tonks and Professor... erm, Remus are taking me home after lunch. He's anxious to get your glasses replaced."

"What's the hurry? Why don't you come with us?" Harry asked.

Hermione frowned. "No more trips to public places – it's one of Professor Dumbledore's new restrictions, I'm afraid. I did agree, you know."

"Sorry," Harry said. "It would have been fun to take you to Flourish and Blotts, now that you have a book allowance to spend."

Hermione gaped at him. "Fun to take me to a book store?" She put her hand to his forehead. "Are you feeling all right?"

"I guess you're rubbing off on me," Harry grinned.

"Speaking of books," Hermione told him, "I've left another stack for you in the library. If you insist on continuing with Shacklebolt, then you have some heavy reading to do."

Harry nodded in agreement. He said, "The books you picked out yesterday were dead useful. I used three or four things straight away."

"You read all of them?" Hermione asked incredulously.

"Great stuff – I couldn't put them down," Harry admitted.

Hermione beamed. "I am rubbing off on you."

Chapter Twelve

INTO THE FRYING PAN

August 3, 1996

Harry followed Professor Flitwick and Lupin into Grimmauld Place's cellar. "What are we looking for, exactly?" he asked.

"I'm seeking the keystone of the house," Flitwick said. "Professor Dumbledore asked Headmaster Nigellus's portrait, but it couldn't recall the precise location. Why do you suppose we wish to locate the keystone, Mr. Potter?"

"Er... uh... because it ties the charm to the entire house?" Harry ventured.

"I'd give that answer at least two points," said Flitwick. "We can anchor a Fidelius charm to a structure in other ways, but all require a tremendous amount of raw power. Professor Dumbledore did not bother with the keystone, of course, because he possesses the necessary ability and he also made himself the secret keeper. I could attempt to recast the charm without locating the proper stone, but there would be some risk of a flawed casting."

"I think this is it," said Lupin. "There are a number of runes inscribed on this particular stone."

Flitwick perched a pair of glasses on his nose and peered at the stone. "Well spotted, Remus," he said. "There are several charms linked to the stone, most of which are of the traditional variety – fertility for the head of house, and the like... and some rather nasty curses, one of which looks to be quite recent. It's linked to a specific individual, which is something rarely done... quite difficult to accomplish, actually."

"I know of that one," Lupin said, "and it's well warranted. Sirius placed it himself."

“I’d rather not tamper with any of them,” Flitwick admitted. “None will interfere with casting of the Fidelius charm, but we should be mindful of these two in particular. They appear to be linking runes for blood feud curses, and we wouldn’t want to accidentally admit anyone from the affected family lines. I don’t know which families these indicate... sketch those two runes, would you, Remus? We may be able to identify appropriate banishing wards.”

Harry was fascinated but also feeling a bit lost. “Should I have taken Ancient Runes, Professor?” he asked.

“That’s an apt question, Mr. Potter,” said Flitwick. “Most of these are Common Runes, which we cover in the seventh year tuition for Charms and Defence. If you’ve an interest in pursuing a mastery for either field, however, you’ll need a fair grounding in Ancient Runes. You can pick that up by apprenticing at a later time, if you like.”

“Shall I unpack your kit?” Lupin asked Flitwick.

“Yes...” Flitwick said absently. “We may have a bit of a problem... I imagine that Professor Dumbledore used Mr. Black’s blood to circumvent any lineal restrictions?”

Lupin frowned. “Bother,” he said.

“You need blood from a Black family member, is that it? Can you use mine?” Harry asked. “I’m Head of the House of Black now.”

Flitwick’s eyebrows beetled. “Is that so? Are you the Head by blood or by kinship?”

“Sirius adopted me, more or less,” said Harry.

“No, no, that won’t do,” Flitwick sighed.

“Your great-aunt was a Black by blood,” Lupin told Harry.

Harry’s eyes widened. “Pardon?”

“Your great-uncle Charlus Potter was married to a Black; I can’t recall her name,” said Lupin. “It’s probably listed on the Black tapestry.”

“That won’t do, either; it’s a kin relationship,” said Flitwick.

Harry suddenly lit. “What about Mrs. Tonks?” he asked.

“Do you mean Nymphadora Tonks’ mother?” asked Flitwick. “Yes, she was Andromeda Black, wasn’t she?”

“Sirius did reinstate her to the family,” added Lupin.

“We need to move this along,” Flitwick said. “Once Dumbledore verbally revealed the secret to me, the existing charm began to dissolve. It won’t be more than another two hours before the charm collapses entirely. Even now, I’d say it only protects against those with directly harmful intent.”

After a brisk explanation, Mr. and Mrs. Tonks returned with Flitwick and Lupin to Grimmauld Place. Mrs. Tonks provided three drops of blood and then watched Flitwick use it to wet the stick ink. Harry couldn’t blame her for her caution; he knew enough about blood magic to understand how easily it could be misused. Once Flitwick mixed in the water and added fixing oils, she settled somewhat. Still, she followed along as Flitwick used the runic ink to inscribe the proper runes on the keystone and in various places about the house. She didn’t relax completely until Flitwick vanished the remaining ink.

Harry invited the Tonkses to remain. He felt it was appropriate that Mrs. Tonks know the location of the Black family home, and Lupin pointed out the need for Mr. Tonks to come and go on account of financial issues.

Flitwick gathered all present in the cellar. He asked Harry to kneel and touched the tip of his wand to Harry’s temple. After a deep breath, he said, “Fidelius.”

The room shimmered in a white light, and the normal draughtiness of the house suddenly became a gale. Harry blinked against the light and struggled to hold his ground against the magical wind. He blinked a second time and was sure that the house was slowly disappearing. The light receded, and the house was gone, the neighbourhood was gone; he and Flitwick and Lupin and the Tonkses appeared to be surrounded by nothingness. Then there was a dull clanging, felt as much as heard. First the neighbourhood reappeared, and then the house around them. When the clanging stopped, dust and debris fell from the stone walls of the cellar, as though the house had been picked up and roughly set down.

“Wh... where are we?” Mrs. Tonks asked.

“It would seem that the charm was successful,” Flitwick said. “I recall casting it, but I haven’t the faintest idea where I cast it or for whom.”

“This is the strangest thing,” said Lupin. “I’m positive I should know where we are...”

Harry snatched up a scrap of parchment from Flitwick’s kit and a stray quill. He found an ordinary bottle of ink amidst the supplies, and wrote:

Harry Potter’s house may be found at 12 Grimmauld Place, St. Pancras, London, UK

“Don’t show that to anyone whom you wish to exclude from the secret,” Flitwick warned.

“I’m comfortable with everyone here,” Harry said. He passed the scrap around, one to the next, and the feelings of confusion in the room dissipated. Harry set the bit of parchment along with the quill and ink next to Flitwick’s kit. “Now what?” he asked.

“I understand that Professor Dumbledore used this residence for, shall we say, more public purposes in the past?” Flitwick said. “If you wish to allow this, Harry, you’ll have to redistribute the information. Do

it in just that fashion – never tell the location to someone aloud, even if that person is already in the know; it wouldn't be worth the risk. Tell it twice aloud in succession, regardless of whether the listeners are aware of the secret, and you will collapse the charm. That is what Professor Dumbledore set in motion by telling both Lupin and myself. I wouldn't keep a permanent written copy of the location, if I were you; recreate it as needed."

"Did Dumbledore rewrite the secret each time?" Harry asked Lupin.

"I'm afraid he didn't," Lupin said with a frown. "I recommend you follow Filius's advice on this." Harry retrieved the parchment from the floor, withdrew his wand and incinerated it.

Mrs. Tonks shuddered. "I never go into our cellar," she said. "It's cold and draughty and full of vermin."

"It's nothing of the kind," Mr. Tonks said. "You just don't want to ferry things in and out of storage."

Mr. and Mrs. Tonks broke into a round of friendly bickering, and Flitwick smiled as he re-packed his kit. "I look forward to the next school year," he said to Harry. "You've shown a deeper interest in Charms than I've observed in your classes."

"I'll be taking things very seriously from now on," Harry said.

Flitwick gazed at Harry for a moment as though he was searching for something, and then he nodded. "That's a capital idea, given your history to date," he said. "Might we be going? I have a round of golf this afternoon with two of my former apprentices – Roland Ettinger and Oscar Pomfrey."

Mr. Tonks turned his attention to Flitwick. "I haven't heard Oscar's name in years," he said; "I didn't know he was still in England."

"Oh, yes. He lived in Canada for a time, but he's in Cornwall now – not far from my family's home, actually," Flitwick said. "He's quite a bit older than you. From where do you know him?"

“I knew him on a professional basis, early in my career,” said Mr. Tonks. He looked to Harry and added, “Oscar is the brother of your school healer.”

“We’ll see you off, then,” Lupin said to Flitwick. He took Flitwick and the Tonkses to catch the Knight Bus at the far end of Grimmauld Place, while Harry returned to his reading. Shacklebolt had been merciless that morning and Harry wasn’t going to be made a fool.

* * * * *

August 4, 1996

“Once more, Potter!” Shacklebolt commanded.

“I’ve tried this five times – it’s hopeless!” Harry fumed.

“What is the surest path to defeat?” Shacklebolt boomed.

“The surest path to defeat is to quit before the battle is joined,” Harry replied in a mocking sing-song voice.

“Just for that, we’ll try it two more times. There is absolutely no reason why you can’t master this. Everything else has come quickly, and that’s spoiled you!” Shacklebolt put his face inches from Harry’s. “Stand up and do it again!”

Harry shot Shacklebolt an icy look. He set his stance and waited for an attack. As soon as Shacklebolt began to cast, Harry attempted to tap his wand against his heel and mutter ‘Tripudio’. In the process, he missed his heel, caused a portion of the dining room floor to jump out of place, and caught Shacklebolt’s slapping spell in the forehead.

“You have the concentration of a flobberworm!” Shacklebolt spat.

“I have dinner with the Grangers soon,” Harry moaned, as he struggled to his feet.

Shacklebolt smirked. "I see the problem, then. You should be thinking about me, and not Miss Granger."

Harry rubbed at his forehead. "I'm thinking about Mr. and Mrs. Granger," he grumbled, "and I still don't understand why we're doing this."

"Jumping gives you another option for dodging a cast spell, and it will make you less predictable," Shacklebolt explained.

"I thought you said I was unpredictable," Harry protested.

"I said that you were undisciplined," Shacklebolt said without a trace of a smile.

"The object is to dodge the spell, right?" Harry asked with exasperation.

Shacklebolt's eyes narrowed. "You have a better idea, Potter?"

"I preferred your approach the first morning," Harry said cautiously. "Yesterday and today, it's like a classroom practical."

Shacklebolt silently appraised Harry for a long while. His words were measured when they finally came. "I brought emotions into that first session that should have been left behind," he said. "I apologise for that; it didn't serve you well. Control is a critical element in combat tactics. I did tell you that I might not be an appropriate tutor."

"I preferred the first morning," Harry repeated. "I learned more that way."

Shacklebolt flashed an enigmatic smile. "If you prefer live-action training, that can be arranged. Personal combat training is usually given in half-day blocks," he said.

"Eight o'clock until noontime, then... seven days a week?" Harry asked hopefully.

Shacklebolt raised an eyebrow. "I'll say this for you – you're hungry. I can respect that. Here's another lesson for you, then: I can be unpredictable as well." Shacklebolt raised his wand to his own head, and Harry found himself face to face with Voldemort's double. "Time to die, Potter," he added in a fair imitation of Voldemort's voice.

Harry felt sudden bursts of panic and anger. The room felt close and overheated, and everything seemed to slow down. He scanned the room. Shacklebolt had taken a good position, Harry recognised. The dining room was long and narrow, and Shacklebolt had him pinned at one end.

"Control, Potter – that's where you need the work," Shacklebolt hissed. "I'm coming for you."

Harry was able to effectively block everything that Shacklebolt threw at him, and the battle turned into a continuous exchange of charms and curses – neither of them withdrew or gained advantage. They manoeuvred in a circle like two boxers stalking each other in the ring. Their curses became more brutal, and they did the room no favours; two sessions' worth of deflected spells had already severely damaged the wall panels and cracked the ceiling in a dozen places.

Harry tried to nudge their circling toward the middle of the room, but Shacklebolt was onto him. Instead, Harry found himself nudged backward until the wall was at his back. He threw all his energy into maintaining a continuous shield against Shacklebolt's barrage of puncturing curses.

"This is the end, Potter," Shacklebolt hissed. "With you out of the way, I'll pick off all of your little friends one by one."

Harry's hand shook with the effort of blocking the curses. "Trying to irritate me, are you?" he panted. How can I get around him? he wondered.

Shacklebolt stopped flicking his wand. "Nice shield, Potter, but you can't keep it up much longer. Surrender!" he boomed. "Surrender or I start with Weasley and the Mudblood."

Harry maintained his shield in front of Shacklebolt's wand, but it was badly flickering. "Stop baiting me," he warned.

"Do you know what he'll do if he defeats you?" Shacklebolt said in his own voice. "Do you understand what Death Eaters used to do with captured Aurors? Imagine an entire day of Cruciatus Curses! Imagine what he'll do to those who support you. I've heard tell of what Death Eaters did to women, Potter..."

The rest of Shacklebolt's words came in slow motion, spoken underwater. Harry took in the whole room, looking for any way out. All the furniture and finishing had been removed – even the chandelier; there was nothing to summon. He couldn't conjure anything without ending the shield spell. I have to get around him! he screamed to himself. If I could get behind him, I'd have a chance! In the midst of the strain of holding his shield in place, with sweat pouring into his eyes, he found himself riveted to a spot on the floor three feet behind Shacklebolt. Reason escaped him. If I could just get there...

Harry heard an intensely loud ringing in his ears, and Shacklebolt was no longer in front of him. Where is he? Harry wondered. He couldn't have Apparated forward, could he? I was practically against the wall. He spun around, half-afraid of finding Shacklebolt splinched.

Harry stood six feet away from the wall. Shacklebolt had turned to face him, his wand lowered and his face frozen in surprise. Harry simply reacted; "Percussum," he said, and knocked Shacklebolt to the floor.

Shacklebolt sat up very slowly, his hand pressed against the side of his jaw. "Twice in three days, you've done something that I can't explain," he said woozily. "We need to discuss this 'control problem' of yours... Potter? Hello?"

Harry's hands shook; he dropped his wand. "I – I don't understand what... how did I... I've never Apparated before..." he said quietly.

“I have no idea if that was Apparation. If you Apparated, then you passed directly through your own defensive spell. You should be splinched in the floorboards, at best,” Shacklebolt explained calmly. “Of course, there was the bit with the table leg as well. I was waiting to bring that up, in case it was a chance event. It most certainly was not.”

“You didn’t accept what Tonks said, then?” Harry asked.

“Tonks can be such a Muggle from time to time, building a fantasy to explain the obvious,” Shacklebolt chuckled. “Stashing wand cores everywhere – spare me. Only Moody is that paranoid. You’re surely not paranoid... overly emotional, but not paranoid.”

Still on his knees, Harry rocked back and forth nervously. He clasped his hands together to stop them from shaking. He knew that Shacklebolt was watching him keenly, so he clenched his teeth and resisted the urge to say what he was thinking.

Shacklebolt saw right through him. “Let it out,” he commanded.

The quick analysis of Harry’s behaviour was like the decisive thrust in a duel. Harry slumped in defeat. “I’m afraid of what’s happening to me,” he blurted out. “I’m afraid I’m going mad, or that I’m going to hurt someone, or... I don’t know...”

Shacklebolt spoke slowly and deliberately. “A little fear is a good thing in combat – hold on to some of it. You don’t know what’s happening to you, and apprehension about that is sensible. Let me ask you this – do you think this fear will help you deal with whatever is happening to you?”

Harry couldn’t bring himself to look up or even to respond. Shacklebolt continued, “I thought not. You fight fear with knowledge, Potter. For tomorrow, I want you to think of every incident in which you believe you’ve performed magic without a wand, as far back as you can remember. For each incident, describe the circumstances – where you were, whom you were with, time of day, time of year, anything you can recall. I also want you to describe how you felt –

happy, sad, tired, keyed up... shaky, perhaps? Can you manage that? I wouldn't want to cut into your dinner plans."

Harry cringed. "No reminders - I'm shaky enough as it is," he said, and managed a faint smile.

Shacklebolt clambered to his feet, and extended a powerful hand to help Harry up. "Tomorrow, we'll have a go at your list. We'll see if we can't put a name to whatever this is. If you can name it, you can control it," he said.

Harry closed his eyes, and took several long, calming breaths. He opened his eyes, and asked, "Shall we work with the swords, then?"

Shacklebolt's brow furrowed. "Perhaps you're a touch too hungry, Potter. Go and read, if you're inclined. I'm sure that Miss Granger waits. Tomorrow, promptly at eight o'clock." Shacklebolt swept through the door and out to the entry hall. Harry caught a glimpse of Lupin and heard a flurry of muttering.

Harry was in no hurry to climb the stairs. Hermione was doubtless immersed in sorting books. He felt too edgy for deep conversation – and Hermione was not one for idle banter. Idle banter was Ron's speciality, and Harry missed that. He missed Ron – the real Ron, not the git who had replaced him – and he had no idea what to do about it.

A strange sound came from the library, followed by a voice that he didn't immediately recognise. He heard the strange sound again, and placed it – it was a moan. He raced to the door. Tonks had her arm around Hermione's shoulder; Bill Weasley was seated in front of her, holding her arm. Winky looked on anxiously. Along with Shacklebolt, Bill and Tonks had been cleared to enter Grimmauld Place the previous evening in order to round out a complement of Order members for Hermione's watch.

"Just one more go, and we'll have it licked," Bill said reassuringly. He flicked his wand, and said "Adtenuatus!" Harry moved closer, and Hermione's arm came into clear view just as it reduced to normal size.

He forced himself to hold back, as it was obvious that Bill had everything under control.

“Better?” Bill asked gently.

Hermione nodded, even as she dabbed at her eyes with her free hand. “It’s my own fault,” she said. “I should have been more observant.”

“Looks innocent enough, doesn’t it?” Bill observed. “The only indication of any kind is that tiny rune on the spine. I would likely have opened it... that is, if the topic had the slightest appeal.”

“Why curse it at all?” Tonks asked. “Did some medieval versions of Fred and George get hold of it?”

Bill chuckled. “I can picture that... doubtful, though. This one could have caused serious injury. Thankfully, no lasting harm done.”

Hermione said, “Thank you for dashing over – terribly sorry for the bother.”

Tonks looked up. “Wotcher, Harry. Hermione found a right nasty book.”

Harry asked Hermione, “You’re all right, then?”

“I’m fine. As Bill said, no harm was done,” she replied with obvious embarrassment.

Bill sat back in his chair. “Perhaps I should have a look around while I’m here – you know, for any other unpleasantness?” he offered, and then asked Harry, “How goes training with Kingsley, then? Hasn’t made any more attempts on your life, has he?”

I see that Tonks is chatty as ever, Harry thought. “Today was interesting,” he mumbled.

“Tonks told us about the bit with the earring – smashing bit of improvisation, that,” Bill said. “Where did you get the idea?”

Harry shrugged. “He’d already crushed my glasses, so I couldn’t see much besides the light shining off his earring. I was reading before hand – Chronicles of the Goblin Wars, and then Scandalous Tactics for Duelling ...”

Bill smirked. “Ripping good book, isn’t it? Some of his ideas simply won’t work, but you have to love it all.”

Harry nodded. “It’s a brilliant book. His ideas for rope conjuring work well enough.”

Bill winced. “Please tell me that you didn’t use number eighteen...?”

“No!” Harry exclaimed. “Can you imagine? That should be an Unforgivable!”

“Too true, too true!” Bill laughed.

Tonks looked blankly at Hermione. “Do you have any idea what they’re talking about?”

Hermione shook her head. “None whatever. It sounds as if that might not be a bad thing, in this case.”

Harry recoiled in mock surprise. “What’s this? There’s a book that Hermione Granger doesn’t want to read?”

“I’m not that bad,” Hermione pouted.

Tonks patted her shoulder reassuringly. “I’m sorry to say that you are that bad.” Hermione swatted away Tonks’ hand.

“I hadn’t pictured you as the reading type, Harry,” Bill said. “If you’re interested in tactics, then be sure to read Mastery of the Sword. It’s ancient – written by a Chinese wizard called Sun-Tzu. He wrote some military philosophy as well, something that Muggles seem to fancy.”

Harry nodded. Looking around the library, he imagined that Hermione would be feeding him stacks of books for quite some time. His eyes settled on a particular folio and it left him cold.

“Bill, how much do you know about what happened to Ron at the Ministry?” Harry asked. Hermione shot him a questioning look.

Bill frowned. “I know what I’ve been told – which isn’t much – and what I’ve heard in passing. He was attacked by some creatures lurking about in the Department of Mysteries. I’d imagine there are more than a few nasty surprises in there.”

He shuddered and went quiet, but Harry motioned for him to press on. “I’ve heard reference to a ‘brain attack’, and I wonder what that actually means,” Bill continued. “Whatever attacked him had fingers or claws or something that left those marks on his arms. I know that the marks have been treated with Oblivious Unction – that says something about the active principle of the attack, but I’m not sure what it means. He’s made the rounds, I can tell you, and there’s no evidence of possession or magical illness. Still...” Bill paused. He radiated unease.

“There’s something else?” Hermione asked cautiously.

Bill hesitated. “Look... I want nothing said of this to Mum or anyone else in the family. We don’t need a row over it, and it’s just an impression, but... when I’m around Ron, I can feel...”

Tonks became very serious. “What can you feel, exactly?”

“It sounds as though you’ve felt it as well,” Bill observed, and Tonks nodded. He explained, “The temperature drops – just barely. Edginess sets in. Auras dim, or flicker a bit. It’s on the edge of perception. It’s the echo of a curse – I know it.”

Tonks agreed. “I was beginning to question myself. Of course, you’d know a curse when you felt one. I’d surely believe that those horrid things are capable –”

Bill cut her off. "You saw them? You saw what attacked him?"

"No, but... I received a briefing," Tonks said. "They were —"

Harry held up a hand to stop her, and took up the folio. "We stumbled across this. I'm afraid that I had a very good view of the things. You're not going to like it, but I think that someone in your family needs to have a look." He turned to the correct page, but held back. "If you'd rather not..." Bill looked over the pages; he flinched once, but betrayed no other reaction.

Tonks moved to peer over his shoulder. "Those fit the description," she whispered.

Bill let out a slow breath. "Thank you for showing this to me," he said grimly. "It explains quite a lot, doesn't it?"

Tonks mumbled, "Croaker trapped them... Croaker... I mean, he's quite old, but couldn't possibly... could he?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "What? Who's Croaker?"

Hermione lit up. "You think you've met the fellow who trapped the cognivores?" she asked.

Tonks answered, "There's an Unspeakable named Croaker, but that was... what, a hundred twenty years ago?"

Hermione noted, "Professor Dumbledore was in his thirties at the time."

"Merlin... Dumbledore's really that old?" Tonks asked. "I knew that he was teaching when he offed Grindewald, but still..."

"He's a hundred years older than my mum and dad – hard to fathom, isn't it?" Bill said.

"Should we see about talking to this Croaker fellow?" Harry asked.

“One of my old housemates works in the Department. I’ll make enquiries,” Bill offered.

“What do you think we can do for Ron?” Hermione asked Bill. Harry was relieved that she was the one to ask the question.

Bill stammered, “Hermione, let me... I’m not sure how to... the thing is...”

Tonks said to Hermione, “I suspect Bill’s trying to suggest that you stay behind the scenes for the moment.”

Bill looked relieved. “I think he might talk to you, Harry. He’s so changeable from moment to moment. He seems to have gotten past this idea that you... you know...”

Harry said darkly, “No, I don’t know. Perhaps you could explain for me.”

Hermione lightly put her hand on Harry’s arm. “Settle yourself – you were the one who suggested that I should go easy on Ron.”

Bill positively gibbered, “It’s just that he has these fits, if you like... totally unreasonable... it took him an entire day to put it aside...”

Tonks advised him, “Spit it out before Harry explodes, would you? We’re all sitting within the blast radius.” Harry glared at her.

Bill wrung his hands and said, “Ron thought that you and Hermione... went off on the motorbike and behaved just like he did with that classmate of yours.”

Hermione stiffened. “How did they behave, precisely?” she asked icily.

“We didn’t go off and snog – Hermione came with me so that I wouldn’t do anything rash. It was a very nice thing for her to do,” Harry protested.

“Thank you, Harry,” Hermione said, though her anger at Ron remained apparent.

Bill tugged at his collar. “Well it’s just that... you see... it’s this – Ron didn’t exactly think that you were snogging...”

Harry ground his teeth, and Hermione turned flaming crimson. “He was shagging that cheap tart?” she shrieked. “I wish Fred and George had hit him in the arse with those fireworks – her as well, that... that... urgh!”

Harry said in a strained voice, “It takes two to shag, as I understand. I doubt that Lavender dragged him out there.”

Bill said gently, “Look, it was... less than shagging but more than snogging, right? I’m counting on discretion here – Charlie and I are the only ones who know anything of it, and I’m not excusing Ron’s behaviour. It’s not just his carrying on with this... Lavender, was it? He’s so, I don’t know, it’s as though he intends to have everything served up to him today, as though there’s no tomorrow...”

It struck Harry all at once. He slumped into a chair as though he had been deflated. “Of course – like there’s no tomorrow,” he said.

“What are you talking about?” Hermione asked sceptically.

“Don’t you see it? He believes that there’s no tomorrow – no future,” Harry said, leading her to see what he already saw.

Her face went from flushed to pale. “You don’t think... Merlin! That explains everything, doesn’t it?”

“He’s still being a complete arse – but it all makes more sense,” Harry said.

Bill buried his head in his hands. “Of course... he saw his own death,” he said in a ghostly whisper. “He knows how it’s going to happen.”

Harry added sadly, “I think he knows when it’s going to happen.”

Hermione insisted, "Visions... Divination... p-p-prophecies... it's all a crock, I tell you! Ron doesn't know how nor when he's going to die, and Harry doesn't – you – don't... you... ever..." She had choked over the word 'prophecies'. Her breathing was ragged; Harry couldn't tell if her eyes were watering or if she was tearing up. It had to be the safeguard spell affecting her, he figured.

He knelt down and wrapped his arm around her. "Let it go," he said gently. "It's safe – everything's safe." He didn't dare say anything more obvious, but hoped that it would make a difference somehow.

"Why is Ron acting this way?" she whispered back. "You should be the... you should... it's you that..."

Harry worried that the safeguard was affecting her again. He put his lips so close to her ear that they brushed against her hair. "The difference between me and Ron is that he thinks he's going to die, and I think I'm going to live," he whispered. It was a lie, but one that she needed to hear. Her breathing steadied.

Tonks rested her hand on Hermione's shoulder. "Everyone's worried about Harry. You've nothing to be ashamed of." Relief washed over Harry – he knew that there would be no questions.

"May I take this book with me?" Bill asked. Hermione nodded.

Bill turned to Harry. "Will you consider talking to Ron? Perhaps he'll open up to you."

"I might," Harry said flatly. "Perhaps he will."

"Thank you for helping," Hermione said weakly, extending her hand to Bill.

Bill took her hand. "I'm sorry that Ron hurt you. He's developing a gift in that department. I'll have that look around now – see if there are any obvious dangers."

“Mind if I observe – pick up some pointers on curse-breaking, perhaps?” Tonks asked.

As soon as they moved away, Harry quietly asked Hermione, “Are you all right?”

“Cold,” she said distantly, “I’m cold.”

“I don’t like this,” Harry said.

“Getting worse each time,” she mumbled. “Scary.” Her eyes were slightly glassy. He resolved to have that conversation with Dumbledore, and perhaps ask him about revealing the prophecy to a wider circle. He could easily imagine Tonks accidentally triggering the safeguard, and then asking questions that only made things worse for Hermione.

“I think you should take a rest until we leave for dinner,” Harry suggested. He helped her stand, and let her lean against him as they slowly left the library.

“Scary,” she mumbled again.

“That’s exactly how I feel about dinner,” Harry admitted.

Harry carefully led her down the stairs to the guest room she had claimed. Winky had preceded them - the bed covers were turned down and the sheer curtains were drawn, muting the sunlight.

“Is this suitable, Harry Potter?” Winky asked.

“Very much so,” Harry answered quietly. “Thank you, Winky.”

Hermione mumbled, “Thank you.”

“Winky is concerned about Miss Granger,” said the house-elf.

Hermione smiled faintly. "Miss Granger will be fine," she said with effort. Winky nodded and left the room, closing the door behind her.

"Harry Potter wishes that were certain," Harry muttered.

Hermione sat on the edge of the bed. "My head is clearing," she insisted. "I'll be fine."

"You need to rest," Harry said firmly.

Hermione lay down on her side. "I need to feel warm again," she said.

Harry drew the bed covers over her, and she shook her head from side to side. "Not enough?" Harry asked. "I could try a warming charm."

"Better idea," she murmured and patted the bed beside her with an open hand. Harry froze, certain that he misunderstood.

She patted the bed again. "Hold me," she said. "Worked after the spell, when we were on the sofa."

Harry felt a little warm and a little dizzy. "Erm... all right, then." He slipped off his shoes, walked around to the other side of the bed, and lay next to her atop the bed covers.

Hermione giggled, and Harry almost fell to the floor. Hermione doesn't giggle – not ever, he thought. "Under here," she said, shaking the covers with one hand as she continued to giggle.

Harry stammered, "I'm certain this should do the trick."

"You're blushing," she observed distantly.

"Don't you find this a little odd?" he blurted out.

"I'm sorry that you're uncomfortable," she said, eyes lowered.

“You don’t make me uncomfortable,” he insisted. His breathing was fast.

“Good,” she murmured, and rolled over. She backed into him, just as in his dream.

“Is this what best friends do?” he wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” she mumbled. He lowered his head to the pillow, trying to avoid contact with her hair. He rested the back of his left hand on her cheek, checking to see if she was still cold. She grasped his hand and pulled his left arm around her, and he was acutely aware of boundaries crumbling to dust. She doesn’t mean any of this, he assured himself. It’s the safeguard – she’s half-asleep and giggling! This doesn’t mean a thing; she’s just cold and that’s the end of it.

He replayed his latest encounter with Shacklebolt in his mind, and thought of ways to avoid being backed to a wall. He was too tired to dwell on his sudden Apparation – it was all getting to him, all the reading and all the practising and all the training with the bags and the weights and all the changes and all the anger and all the fighting and all the loss and the loneliness and the bloody Witch Weekly article and

“Hello, Harry.”

Harry sat up abruptly in the bed. Hermione was nowhere to be seen. He pushed his new glasses back into place, thankful for the Unbreakable Charm on the frames.

Sirius sat in the chair next to the door. “Are you going to say anything, or are you just going to stare?” he asked, and a smirk formed on his gaunt face.

“I don’t understand – I don’t... how...erm, hello?” Harry managed.

Sirius broke into his familiar barking laugh. “That’s a start. I thought I’d drop by and see how you’re making out.”

“I have so many questions!” Harry began excitedly. “I...”

Sirius cut him off. “My questions first, Harry – it’s the prerogative of the dead. How’s your love life?”

“Excuse me?” Harry asked, flustered.

“I asked you about your love life,” Sirius repeated.

“You visit me from the dead, and you’ve nothing better to ask than that?” Harry complained.

Sirius shrugged. “I have to live vicariously. Besides, you know I have an interest on that front; you saw the oath I left for the Granger girl.”

“We need to talk about that,” Harry grumbled.

Sirius waved him off. “Later... we can talk about that later. So, I was reading Teen Witch Weekly and...”

“You were reading Teen Witch Weekly? Setting aside that it was Teen Witch Weekly... you’re telling me that dead people can see it?” Harry asked dubiously.

“Oh, we get all the papers here,” Sirius insisted. “They’re a few days behind, of course.”

“I guess I imagined something different for an afterlife,” Harry said.

“Incredibly mundane, I’m afraid,” Sirius told him. “Terrible traffic, paint peeling everywhere, nothing ever gets done... that, however, is a story for another time. Back to your love life, then.”

Harry cringed. “Of all the... I suppose you saw the Daily Prophet, as well?”

Sirius chuckled. “Oh, yes. That young lady in the Prophet photo – she was on that list, wasn’t she?”

Harry buried his face in his hands. "This is a nightmare," he moaned.

"Oh, I don't know," said Sirius. "It looks as though you're in a familiar place."

"Of course it looks familiar; it's your house, after all," Harry said.

"Some memories are hazier than others, I suppose. Perhaps it's a place I wanted to forget?" Sirius wondered aloud.

"I could see why you wouldn't want to remember Grimmauld Place," said Harry.

Sirius stroked his chin. "Grimmauld Place... why doesn't that ring true?"

"You were stuck here for a year," Harry groaned. "12 Grimmauld Place – it was your parents' home, for pity's sake!"

"Oh, of course... yes, I didn't want to remember 12 Grimmauld Place... not the best of times... but I did want to remember you, Harry" said Sirius.

"This is a strange dream. Why haven't I dreamed of you like this before?" Harry asked. "Is this a dream, or are you really visiting me?"

Sirius said, "What do you think, Harry? Is this just a garden-variety dream? It could be so much more than that, of course, and all you have to do is play..."

A lurid jacket and pants worthy of Fred and George instantly replaced Sirius' black robe. He finished his thought with a cadence straight from the tackiest reader on the Beeb. "... 'Who's Harry's True Love?' Let's meet the contestants!"

Lisa Turpin entered the room, wearing a gown that Harry vaguely recalled from the Yule Ball. She smiled wanly, and stood next to Sirius.

Still speaking in the affected cadence, Sirius announced, "Our first contestant for Harry's heart is the lovely Lisa Turpin. Representing Ravenclaw House, Lisa can out-think a dozen Hufflepuffs and still dance the night away. Polite applause, please, for Lisa Turpin." Recorded applause resounded in the background, like a chat show on the telly.

Sirius shook his head. Returning to his normal voice, he said, "Not a flicker, Harry, nothing at all there. I think we can move this along. Thanks for playing, Lisa. We have a Snuffles the Wonderdog statuette waiting for you backstage. Bye-bye!" Lisa waved sadly and disappeared.

Back to his Beeb reader's voice, Sirius announced, "Our second contestant is the captivating Gretchen Hargrove..." He dropped the voice. "Goodness, Harry – a scowl. You didn't appreciate that little kiss on the cheek, did you? Well, a parting gift for Miss Hargrove, then." Harry heard a shrill scream outside the door, followed by pre-recorded laughter. He tried willing himself to wake, to no avail.

"Our third contestant is the voluptuous Daphne Greengrass," Sirius intoned. Daphne sauntered through the door in a tightly fitted top, a barely-legal mini and black heels. Harry silently congratulated himself on his vivid imagination. "Miss Greengrass is certainly the apple of every boy's eye at Hogwarts, isn't she? Now, I know that her lineage is... well... rather dark, and she was certainly sorted to Slytherin for a reason, but still..." Sirius laughed. "Take a breath, Harry. Miss Greengrass, if you'd please stand over there."

Daphne smiled faintly at Harry, but it was a sad smile somehow. "I certainly didn't expect that this would be about you. I never thought you paid me any mind," she said. "That's... sweet, really. I... I don't suppose you'd mind if I changed my clothes? This is a bit much."

Harry blushed. "Erm... sorry. I suppose that I should give you the benefit of the doubt, shouldn't I?" A pair of denims instantly replaced the mini, and her heels were exchanged for trainers.

She lowered her eyes. "Thank you, Harry. The boys I know aren't nice enough to... what am I saying? This is the strangest dream..."

"Our fourth contestant is the formidable Cho Chang," Sirius went on. Cho walked in, wearing a long black dress with a high slit.

"Not again... I'm tired of dreaming about you, Harry," Cho pleaded, "so very, very tired. This has to end."

"She's as strong as you in her way, and quite intelligent – yet not very smart. Of course, there's a history between you. The question is – could you overcome that, Harry?" Harry knew the answer and it appeared that Sirius did as well.

"Sorry, Miss Chang. Thanks for dropping by," Sirius said. The floor opened, and she fell away.

"More than halfway there, Harry, and only one finalist so far," Sirius said. "I was more inclined to lust than love, myself. I'd completely understand, of course. Hell, if I were younger..."

"Sirius!" Harry protested. He half-expected that the idea of Sirius ogling Daphne Greengrass would immediately wake him up. He wondered if somehow the thought of Daphne was keeping him the dream, and the idea made him feel very uncomfortable. He wondered why she was sad.

"Fifth on our list is the... erm... unique Luna Lovegood," Sirius announced. Luna entered the room wearing a silver dress festooned with sparkles and butterbeer caps, and ratty trainers that peeked out from beneath. She looked around curiously, smiled at Harry, and then pulled out a copy of the Quibbler from nowhere and began to read it upside down. "You're dead, in case you've forgotten," she told Sirius absently.

"What can one say about Miss Lovegood... frankly, I don't know," Sirius wondered. "There's something about her company that you find beguiling, isn't there? Does she understand you, Harry? Does she support you in some special way? I don't understand this one."

Harry struggled. "Luna's... innocent... but not innocent. It's hard to explain. She takes a thrashing every day from nearly everyone, but she bounces back and keeps going. I admire that."

"True love material, then?" Sirius asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know what love is."

"You should give yourself more credit, Harry," Luna offered.

Sirius stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I suppose you may not know. Perhaps we have that in common... Let me ask this way: would it be painful to lose her? Would you miss her if she weren't there?"

Harry said, "Of course. Luna's a good friend."

Luna smiled strangely. "Thanks; I feel the same," she said. "Strange dream you're having, isn't it? I'm not yet certain why I'm here, but I'll take it as a compliment for the moment."

Sirius raised an eyebrow toward Luna. "Over by Miss Greengrass, then," he said brusquely. Luna curtsied and strode awkwardly across the room. She looked Daphne up and down, shrugged, and returned to reading the Quibbler. Daphne appraised the entire scene with the same vaguely sad expression as before.

"Today's sixth contestant is the spunky Ginny Weasley," Sirius announced.

Ginny entered the room with her arms crossed. "What in the hell is going on here?" she demanded. Then she caught sight of Sirius. "You!" she howled. "I've had quite enough of you! Thanks for the money, thanks for the violin – now leave me alone!"

She turned, and saw Harry sitting on the bed. Her eyes widened. She looked around the room. "What the... this is my room at the... what sort of dream is this?"

“I’ve been asking myself that for a while now,” Harry offered.

“I know about your little kiss, of course,” Sirius said. “I’ve developed a nasty habit of spying on you over the years, Harry Potter. Do you really believe that she could give up on you that easily?”

Ginny protested, red-faced, “How dare you make assumptions about my feelings?”

Sirius’ eyes narrowed. “I understand you better than you understand yourself, my dear little Ginny. You’re so transparent. You loved him so much that you almost lost yourself. You have a tendency to do that, don’t you... losing yourself in powerful men. You’re a bit obsessive, aren’t you?”

“If this is about Riddle, you’re out of line,” Harry warned. “She was eleven years old.”

Sirius shook his head. “She has a tendency for questionable judgement, as well. Opening an unfamiliar book... she didn’t think... she doesn’t think. Rather like you, Harry – rush in first, and repair the damage later. Quite a combustible pair, aren’t you?”

Ginny cried, “Why are you doing this? You were so nice to me... then there was that horrid will, and now this!”

Harry seethed, “If you wanted to be sure that I wouldn’t miss you anymore, Sirius, then you’ve succeeded.”

Ginny looked down at herself. She was wearing a short strapless dress. “Look at this – it makes me look like a pole! This is a complete nightmare!”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said. “Why don’t you pick something else, then?”

A jumper and jeans replaced the dress. “Much better,” she said. “Now, if I could only wake up...”

Sirius said, "Sorry, dear Ginny, but this is Harry's show. You're just one of the players, albeit an important one. Now, be a good girl and stand over by Luna."

Harry thought it seemed as though Ginny was forced to walk across the room. She immediately bombarded Luna with whispers and mutters; Luna appeared to reassure her.

"Our last contestant should be self-evident," Sirius announced. "The resplendent Hermione Granger, ladies and gentlemen."

Hermione peered into the room. "Harry?" she called. "What's going on here? I... we... weren't we in this room?"

Harry sighed. "I don't know... I thought this was a dream... I still think it's a dream... I don't know anymore."

Hermione looked down. "Erm... I see I've changed clothes. That puts it squarely in dream territory, don't you think?" She was wearing Harry's white terry cloth bathrobe. She pulled the front out from her body slightly, and blushed. "Goodness!" she exclaimed. "Definitely a dream! At least this isn't Transfiguration class."

Harry sniggered. "Is that a common dream, then?" Hermione scowled at him.

"Terribly familiar, aren't you both?" Sirius observed. "The very best of friends, clearly. There's more to it, though – isn't there, Harry? Face facts... she makes your pulse rise, doesn't she? I can feel it in you."

Harry snapped, "Sirius, put a stop to this – now!"

Sirius gestured toward Luna, Ginny and Daphne. "Perhaps you don't want to choose at all, Harry. I can respect that. *Ménage à cinc*, then?"

Hermione and Harry simultaneously shouted, "Sirius!"

Daphne appeared hurt. “Everyone has the wrong idea about me,” she said quietly.

Luna’s expression was unreadable. “A typically male suggestion,” she said flatly. “You greatly misjudge Harry – which is not surprising, of course.”

Ginny’s hands were defiantly at her hips. “Of all the... I’d like to take your violin and shove it up your –”

Sirius gave a mock-frown. “You can’t blame me for trying, Harry Potter.” He returned to his game show cadence. “All right, then. It’s time for ‘Who’s Harry’s True Love?’ to come to an end. You must make your final selection. Who will it be?”

Harry crossed his arms. “Sod off, Sirius,” he said firmly.

“I asked you ‘Who will it be?’” Sirius hissed.

Harry gritted his teeth. The dream was giving him a terrible headache. “If you’re all-seeing, then you should already know the answer,” he snapped.

Sirius’ mouth smiled but his eyes failed to join in. “Well, you may not be ready for true love... you’re surprisingly inexperienced, for one. Frankly, I would have expected you to sample the fruits of your fame – I certainly would have, in your place. Still, young love is so... delicious.”

Luna, Ginny and Daphne disappeared.

Harry found himself lying down in the bed, with Hermione.

Sirius said generously, “Enjoy yourselves! Life’s terribly short. You may as well say exactly what you’re thinking; after all, it’s just a dream – there’s nothing to lose, is there?”

Harry began, “But I still have so many questions, Sirius. I...”

Sirius waved him off. "I know most of what I need to know," he purred. "We'll see each other again – very soon, I promise. You'll have all the time you need to ask questions then, both of you. Patience!" He winked, and disappeared in a flash.

Harry didn't know what to make of any of it. Hermione searched his face, and he was overwhelmed by how real it all seemed – her expressions, her voice, and the things she said. He wondered if he was actually that observant.

Hermione said, "I'm generally a very vivid dreamer; it stands to reason, since I'm prone to recalling detail. I have to say... this is the most realistic dream I've ever had, even beyond the last one that I recall. Do you suppose this is an effect of the safeguarding spell?"

"Everything about you seems so real," he admitted.

"Well, he did say to enjoy myself; I suppose I can test the limits a bit. So... you feel... you know, that way about me?" she asked.

Harry swallowed hard. "Erm... I think I might. I fret about you, you know? I think that's what keeps me away – the thought of you being hurt. What about you?"

Hermione hesitated. "Yes... definitely in dream territory, aren't we. If anyone overheard, I'd be sent to St. Mungo's for this – having a full-blown conversation with myself!"

Harry shook his head. "It's like listening to you in the Common Room – amazing, really... although I prefer being here like this. You...erm...wear my robe well..." He felt his throat tighten as he spoke, and his head felt light and fuzzy.

"I could give into this," Hermione said. "If it was real, I'd be so afraid of ruining our friendship. I never want to lose that. You know that I'll probably muck up any relationship you ever have, always hanging about and all? I hope you'll forgive me for that, but I need you. I'm afraid that I'll push you away."

Harry traced the line of her jaw with his fingertips. "You can't push me away. It's just that I have to pull away, to keep you safe. I do love you, you know."

Hermione's mouth formed a silent "O". She just stared at him.

Harry started to correct himself. "What I meant, of course was... well, I meant that in a certain way... that is, I..."

Hermione leant in and kissed him, and the world exploded. She backed away slightly, and looked at him nervously. He couldn't stop smiling, and he was the one who leant in for another kiss. They devoured one another for a while, like two predators unleashed to feed.

Harry came up for air, and Hermione said seriously, "I love you, as well. Please tell me our friendship can survive this?"

Harry laughed. "This is a dream, remember? No one will be the wiser."

Hermione snorted. "That's an excellent point. I suppose that there are no consequences whatever."

"Well, I might have some difficulty looking at you later today," Harry observed. "So... Sirius promised that this could be a better-than-average dream –"

"I think that's assured, Harry," Hermione giggled. She ran her hand through his hair. "I deserve a wicked dream, with the summer I've had. We can do anything you like – surprise me."

"Anything we like, you say?" Harry asked. "I wouldn't know where to start."

"That's to be expected from you, isn't it? Honestly, this whole 'true love' business is going to tax me! Well, then...I have a few things in mind." Hermione smiled seductively, which was something that Harry had never before contemplated. "You see, it's good to be well-read,"

she added, and then whispered a few things in Harry's ear – one involving whipping cream and chocolate - that took his breath away.

“What on Earth have you been reading?” he gasped. She laughed, and he smiled. “This beats the stuffing out of dreams of Voldemort, I can tell you!” he said, and realised that he was wearing only boxers.

Hermione rolled atop Harry, kissed him deeply, and then teased, “I'm glad I come before Voldemort in your eyes...” She stopped abruptly. “Harry? Where did the bed go? Where have we...? Oh, no... not this...”

Hermione quickly moved off and clutched together the front of her bathrobe. Her face was frozen in stark terror. Harry sat up and looked around the Transfiguration classroom. They were atop the massive desk at the front. Neville, Dean and Seamus all lay atop Ron, who struggled mightily. He swore loudly and continuously, and his three dorm mates swore back. Lavender and Parvati Patil gaped at them in mute shock, and a gaggle of Slytherins laughed hysterically. Harry was grateful that Hermione had the robe, but wished he were clad in something more.

“Oh, this is too much!” Draco Malfoy howled. “Prince Potty and his Mudblood princess, about to shag on McGonagall's desk! And you thought probation was bad?”

Pansy Parkinson tut-tutted, “Potter, I had no idea that you were so under-demanding.” Millicent Bulstrode made a terribly rude crack about Hermione's appearance – Harry was furious but struck by the irony of the source – and Malfoy resorted to the same obscene gesture that he'd employed at the will reading.

“This isn't something I'd care to dream again,” Harry said quietly.

Hermione's voice was uneven and strained. “I'm usually presenting, without the benefit of a robe. Professor McGonagall's always standing right over there.”

As soon as Hermione pointed, McGonagall appeared before them. It would have been impossible for her lips to become any thinner. "Miss Granger and Mister Potter, you will explain yourselves at once!" she thundered.

"I want to wake up now," Hermione said weakly. "Please, let me wake up."

Harry put his arm around her. "It's all right," he whispered. "I won't let you be hurt, not even in my dreams."

Facing down McGonagall, he announced loudly, "We were just practising our Animagus transformations, Professor."

McGonagall's eyebrows raised a notch. "I must have misheard, Mister Potter. Did you say 'Animagus transformations'?"

"Yes, Professor," Harry said. "Why don't we show them, Hermione?"

"Harry, what in the devil are you talking about?" Hermione whispered frantically.

"This is a dream. Why can't we transform, if we want to?" Harry whispered back. "Just think of an Animagus form and follow my lead." Harry concentrated, and immediately felt himself changing. There were shrieks from his classmates; he hoped he hadn't turned into a snake.

He asked Hermione in a throaty roar, "How's it coming, then?"

She growled back, "Quite well. I imagine you might expect to become a snake; not in this dream, it seems." He turned awkwardly, unaccustomed to moving on four legs. Next to him stood a sleek lioness with Hermione's eyes.

Harry watched in awe as she moved effortlessly across the room and presented every impression of stalking the Slytherins. Malfoy dove over two desks to get away from her.

“Perfect,” he roared. “You were made for this.” He followed her and bared his teeth at Malfoy. She nuzzled him, and her nose brushed against his mane.

“So...the king of the jungle, eh? Yes, exactly as I would expect,” she purred as the colours began to drift and the room fell away...

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Harry was warm and comfortable, despite a lingering dull headache. He slowly stretched, his senses still hazy from sleep. He drew his left arm back and realised that his hand was trapped just below Hermione’s armpit. When it occurred to him exactly what his hand was cupping through the bed sheet, he fought rising panic and very carefully disengaged himself. Still foggy from the dream, he gently moved aside the bed covers wrapped around Hermione’s shoulder. When he revealed her shirt collar, he breathed a very quiet sigh of relief – although a small part of him had hoped to see white terry cloth. He gingerly slid off the bed, and tiptoed to the door. Looking back, he saw that Hermione looked relaxed with a hint of a smile on her face. He was pleased – it was a far cry from the pained look too often on her face.

Time for a shower, he thought; a long one, I suspect. It was at that moment that he remembered the dinner-to-come. His concerns about looking at Hermione without blushing were washed away, and replaced by the thought of appearing terribly guilty before her parents. Lupin had suggested that he bring flowers and a bottle of wine to the Grangers’ home as gifts. What wine goes with fear? he wondered.

“What an interesting choice,” Mr. Granger remarked, as he peered closely at the bottle. “Care to sample it with me?”

Harry hesitated. “Remus bought it for me; I only told the shopkeeper what I was looking for. I didn’t, erm... I didn’t really know what I was doing, sir.”

“You’ve never had wine with dinner before?” Mr. Granger asked. When Harry shook his head, he continued, “Merlot is a fair choice. That’s not all you asked of the shopkeeper, is it?”

“Why would you say that?” Harry asked nervously.

“Anyone working in a wine market would have made a more conservative choice, if unprompted,” Mr. Granger explained. “This particular vineyard has a reputation for a more complex palate. I’ve never had any of their offerings, truthfully.” He expertly removed the cork from the bottle. “It should be a bit astringent at first. Let’s allow it to breathe, shall we?” He ran the end of the cork beneath his nose, and watched Harry’s expression. “A bit of a formality these days, I’ll grant you, but it’s still wise to check for mould.”

Mrs. Granger bustled into the kitchen. “The flowers are lovely, Harry,” she said. “I’m quite fond of delphinium.” Ten points to the Hogwarts side, Harry thought, thanks to Hermione.

She stopped, and eyed the bottle. “Te Awanga... a New Zealand merlot, eh? Was that intentional?”

Harry was becoming accustomed to an elevated pulse after fifteen minutes at the Grangers’, but he still felt a charge of nervousness. “I’m sorry, ma’am?” he said.

“Distinctive, but not audacious,” she smiled. “Do you fancy yourself a strategist, Mr. Potter?”

“Mother, are you trying to intimidate Harry, or are you just demonstrating your natural superiority?” Hermione snapped as she entered the room.

Mrs. Granger shot Hermione an icy look, and Harry took the opportunity to look away. Her mother had come so close to his instructions to the shopkeeper that she could have been snooping in the wine market. Thank Merlin that Hermione walked in, he thought.

Harry turned to the mixing bowl, balloon whisk and assemblage of ingredients before him on the island. Stick to what you know, Potter, he thought as he opened the bag of flour, but don't get too comfortable. He knew there was little risk of that – the anxiety provoked by Mrs. Granger at every turn, Hermione's abrupt distancing from him, and the mild embarrassment that struck each time he looked at her all conspired against confidence.

"Thomas, did you put our guest to work?" Mrs. Granger asked. "Harry, feel free to relax; we'll manage everything."

Harry quickly measured flour into the mixing bowl, formed a well in the centre, and broke an egg one-handed into the well. "I'm happier with something to do, Mrs. Granger," he said honestly. "Besides, there won't be time for the batter to rest if it isn't started now. The joint will be ready in around an hour and a half, I'd wager."

Mrs. Granger looked into the lower oven, and crossed her arms. Harry noticed with some satisfaction that she was smiling.

"I couldn't find a baking dish," Harry continued as he briskly whisked the mixture, "and I'm assuming that there are drippings or fat on hand."

"You know your way around a kitchen," Mrs. Granger said. "Perhaps you could encourage Hermione; she should be able to prepare something other than croque-monsieurs or bubble-and-squeak... Dora, if you eat all the carrots, there'll be none left for boiling!"

Tonks, who had sidled up to the end of the counter, frowned. "Sorry, Cordelia," she managed despite a mouthful of carrot.

Harry looked at Tonks, his eyebrow raised. Tonks swallowed forcibly, and explained, "You know I don't care for my given name, Harry. Cordelia doesn't care to call me by my last name. We... agreed to use my dad's pet name." Her expression made perfectly clear the level of agreement.

Hermione walked around the island. As she passed Tonks, she smoothly handed off a freshly peeled carrot. The two exchanged subtle grins. Harry made a point of not reacting, and returned his attention to the Yorkshire pudding batter taking form before him.

“Harry, I can handle that if you like,” Mr. Granger offered.

Harry shook his head. “Happy to do it,” he said, as he began adding milk.

Hermione peered into the lower oven at the joint of beef and roast potatoes. “Merlin! That’s enough to feed ten – we’ll be eating Sunday seconds all week!” she exclaimed.

“With your guards, I should think it would be closer to twelve,” Mrs. Granger said. “Harry, would you be put out if I asked for a second batch of batter?”

“And that's my cue to check on the wards,” said Tonks, and she exited the kitchen quickly and with unexpected grace.

“Not at all,” Harry said. He thought for a moment, and quickly added, “I didn't know there would be other guests, or I would have brought more wine.”

“Speaking of wine, Harry...” Mr. Granger said. He handed Harry a glass containing a small splash of merlot.

“Would you please excuse us for a moment?” Hermione said through a clearly forced smile. She grabbed her mother by the elbow and pulled toward the dining room.

Harry returned his attention to the wine. “First, we check to see if it’s clear,” Mr. Granger instructed. Harry gazed at the swirling merlot in his glass.

Mr. Granger passed the glass beneath his nose. “Another whiff... no mouldiness, no dustiness, nothing acrid.”

Harry went through the same exercise. "It smells... it smells like berries," he observed. "Blackberries?"

Mr. Granger nodded. "Very good. A bit of a foodie, are you? Right then, time for a taste." Harry took a careful sip.

He could hear Hermione's voice rising in the dining room. "I should have known you wouldn't make a Sunday dinner exception just for Harry! This is so unfair... don't tell me to lower my voice! I can't believe... please! As if you had any regard whatever for my feelings! I will not... no, I will not; I'll gladly sit in the front room with..."

Harry looked to Mr. Granger for an explanation. Mr. Granger deadpanned, "Welcome to my summer, Harry. Given my druthers, I'd have picked Majorca."

"What are they arguing about?" Harry wondered aloud. He took another sip of the merlot. It fascinated him how something could taste sweet and bitter all at once.

"A rather ill-advised idea on Cordelia's part, I'm afraid," Mr. Granger said. "Sometimes, Harry, you have to allow the consequences of a poor decision to unfold."

"Are they always like this?" Harry asked nervously.

"It gives one pause, doesn't it?" Mr. Granger acknowledged. "When one lets up, the other provokes. I must say, this is turning into an exceptional row – even by this summer's standard."

Mrs. Granger's voice rose in waves. Harry couldn't understand most of what she said. "...let me explain... unreasonable... disrespectful... think about the impression... houseful of maniacs... reprehensible... tired of your cheek... questionable influence... use the intellect that God gave you for two blessed minutes... decent people... civilized!"

Hermione thundered, "I will not be ambushed, and I will certainly not share a meal with Ron Weasley!" and stomped into the kitchen.

Harry choked on the merlot and burst into a coughing fit. Mr. Granger asked him repeatedly if he was all right and offered a glass of water. Hermione took Harry's wineglass from him, seized the bottle of merlot, filled the glass, and tossed it back in a single swallow. Mr. Granger closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Mrs. Granger was nowhere to be seen. The Weasleys are coming for dinner, Harry thought. I don't think there's a right wine for that.

Chapter Thirteen

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?

“You actually made the Yorkshire pudding with your hands, Harry?” Arthur Weasley asked.

Harry absently drew his fork through the food on his plate. “I picked up some useful skills from Aunt Petunia,” he said darkly.

Mr. Granger turned to Bill Weasley. “More wine, Bill?” he asked.

Hermione held out a glass. “Please,” she replied.

Mrs. Granger flashed Hermione a disingenuous smile. “You know the rule, Hermione,” she said. “One glass with dinner until you’re of age. Of course, moderation is always best no matter one’s age. Don’t you agree, Thomas?”

Mr. Granger topped Bill’s glass with the remaining merlot, and turned to what Harry reckoned was his third glass of cabernet. “Certainly... yes, of course,” he said.

“You don’t want to be miserable all night,” Mrs. Granger advised Mr. Granger; he formed a subtle scowl that went as quickly as it came, and helped himself to more carrots and peas.

Bill sipped the merlot. “Very pleasant,” he said. “It reminds me of a particular table wine... can't remember which one, though.”

Molly Weasley’s brow furrowed. “I wasn’t aware that you had a fondness for Muggle drinks,” she said.

Bill said, “When I travelled for Gringotts, Mum, it wasn't unusual for me to be the only wizard within a hundred miles or more. The Muggles I met along the way usually took wine with dinner. I rather enjoyed it, truthfully.”

“You’re well-travelled then?” Mrs. Granger asked.

“Every continent excepting Antarctica,” Bill said proudly. “Not much call for curse-breaking there, you can imagine.”

“If you could go anywhere – right this instant – where would you go?” Tonks piped up.

“There are so many places...” Bill began. “This instant? Canada, I imagine – British Columbia, if you’re at all familiar. I was partial to Chile as well; spent over three months there... and New Zealand – the south island, in particular. Of course, they’re in mid-winter now... I see the merlot came from there. No wonder it was familiar?”

Ron looked at Harry, and his eyes narrowed. “I suppose Harry made the wine, as well,” he sneered.

Hermione’s eyes burned at Ron. “He chose the vineyard and the varietal,” she snapped, and added “prat” under her breath.

Ginny took her eyes off of Harry – for what felt to Harry like the first time since the Weasleys had arrived – and frowned at Ron and Hermione. “Stop it,” she demanded.

Mrs. Granger broke the uneasy silence that followed. “Molly, would you care to help me with dessert?” she asked.

A flash of the old Ron broke through. “Dessert, eh?” he said excitedly, and quickly added, “Er... it was a fine dinner, Mrs. Granger.”

Mrs. Granger smiled in acknowledgement. “Thank you, Ron. You’re up for pumpkin pie, then?”

Ron grimaced. “Erm... is there more than one choice?” he asked tentatively.

“ Ronald Weasley! Mind your manners, please!” Mrs. Weasley barked.

Mrs. Granger flushed slightly. "I'm sorry, Ron," she said. "I'm certain we can scrape up something. With all the pumpkin juice around here this summer, I simply assumed that... well, I'll find something."

Mrs. Weasley managed her own disingenuous smile. Her eyes bore into Ron, even as she spoke to Mrs. Granger. "That won't be necessary, Cordelia. Ron will make due with the same dessert as the rest of us. I fear our good fortune may be going to his head."

Ron crossed his arms. He wore a new jacket, fashioned from the same iridescent material as Fred and George favoured but mostly grey in colour, and a sleek black turtleneck tucked into his denims. Harry had already decided that the new wardrobe made Ron look older – in fact, it made him look a great deal like Bill. Of course, Ron omitted the fang earring and ponytail; his life would be an unending Howler if he did that, Harry surmised.

Hermione offered, "You must admit that pumpkin is out of season. Even the juice is a little off in the summer." Ron relaxed his posture a bit.

Sensing that Ron required a defence, Harry added, "Pumpkin pie's fine, of course, but Hermione's right. It is a fall dish, isn't it?"

Mrs. Weasley's forced smile fell and she said in clipped tones, "Perhaps I failed to make myself clear. Everyone will make due with the same dessert."

Mr. Weasley offered, "One might expect Ginny to be... averse to pie, Molly."

Ginny snapped, "Dad!" Bill chuckled, and Mrs. Weasley rolled her eyes. Ron covered his mouth to stifle a snort.

"I believe there's a story here," Tonks observed.

Ginny clenched her jaw. "Fine," she muttered. "I tried my hand at baking, and it went something less than well."

Ron chortled. “Burned an apple pie to a crisp,” he blurted between snorts. “Then there was the treacle...” He burst into shaking laughter.

“It wasn’t funny,” Ginny moaned. “I had to paint the kitchen, even after the scouring spells.”

Harry successfully fought the urge to laugh, but Hermione failed. She laughed until tears formed, and she dabbed at her eyes. “Oh, I’m sorry, Ginny,” she managed.

Mrs. Weasley looked at Ginny indulgently. “I’ll put out a piece for you, dear – just in case you change your mind,” she said.

Mrs. Granger placed a dessert plate with a slice of pumpkin pie before Harry. Mrs. Weasley set bowls of whipping cream on each end of the dining room table.

Harry looked at the slice of pie. Under other circumstances, he would have politely declined. He eyed the whipping cream, reached for the serving spoon and ladled a copious amount onto the pie.

Ron forced down a bite, and did a poor job of concealing his dislike. Ginny stared at her piece for a time and then doused it with whipping cream.

Harry looked up, just in time to see Hermione drop spoonful after spoonful of whipping cream onto her plate. She returned the serving spoon, took a forkful of pie, immersed it in the pile of the whipping cream, and ate it. Then she giggled.

“What’s funny, then?” Mr. Granger asked.

“Nothing, Dad,” she chuckled.

Mrs. Granger looked suspicious. “Hermione, you’re giggling like a schoolgirl. We don’t giggle,” she observed.

“It’s nothing, Mother,” Hermione insisted. “I just had, erm, a few things on my mind.” She ate a forkful of whipping cream without any pie at all, caught Harry’s eye, and then blushed.

Impossible, Harry thought. It has to be the wine. He took a slow calming breath. I must be red as the Gryffindor crest, he realised.

He pushed back from the table abruptly. “Excuse me,” he said quickly, and dashed into the kitchen. He turned on the cold-water tap and splashed his face. He braced himself against the counter and let the cool droplets fall.

Tonks followed Harry through the door. “Everything all right in here?” she asked. When he didn’t answer, she added, “Is it the wine getting to you, or the company?”

Harry said hurriedly, “It must be the wine – I’m not accustomed.”

Tonks put her hand on his shoulder. “Not very fun watching Hermione going spare, is it? She’s had moments like this all summer, but...” She sighed. “Harry, I know you’re not going to like this, but it’s been far worse since she started sorting through the Black’s library. Do you think she may have stumbled across something worse than that cursed book?”

It’s the safeguard – it must be, Harry thought. “She’s cautious enough,” Harry ventured.

“I worry about her,” Tonks said. “I will say that her parents have adjusted rather well. A month ago, Cordelia would have popped a seam over that business with the pie. She’s become more relaxed around us, thankfully. I like Tom; he reminds me of my dad.”

“How red was I?” Harry asked quietly. “When... erm... when Hermione was going on about the whipping cream? How red was I?”

“How red were you? I don’t know... I didn’t notice, I suppose,” Tonks answered. “Why would you be red...?” Her brow furrowed.

“I had this dream, you see, and when she started giggling... and then she said she had a few things in mind... just promise me that you’ll keep this to yourself,” Harry said in a forced whisper.

Tonks’ eyes bulged. “You’re having dreams involving Hermione and whipping cream?” she whispered back. “Gods! Does she know?”

“Not about Hermione and whipping cream!” Harry spluttered. “It was just a very real dream, and... and I’d almost swear that we shared it.”

Tonks became very serious. “I hope that’s not the case. Shared dreams are an ill omen,” she said, too loudly for Harry’s taste.

Ron’s voice rang out. “Tonks, you sound like Trelawney.” He affected the Divination teacher’s reedy voice, and intoned, “In the seventh month, when Jupiter and Mercury are in conjunction, an ill wind shall seek out Harry Potter and it shall muss his hair terribly – oh, the woe and weal!”

Harry laughed. Finally! – that sounds like Ron, he thought. “Read any good tea leaves lately, then?” he asked jokingly, before it occurred to him that Ron wasn’t smiling.

“I don’t need tea leaves, just my eyes. Try this one on, Harry,” Ron snarled. “In the eighth month, when Venus is besieged by Saturn and Mars, the Princess did laugh at the whipping cream, the Prince did panic, and the Fool... well, he was just a fool, wasn’t he?”

Harry’s hackles rose, despite himself. “I didn’t think you bought into Divination, Ron – just into Lavender Brown’s knickers,” he sneered.

Ron strode purposefully toward Harry, and Tonks stepped backward toward the door to the dining room. “Well, boys, it appears that you have some catching up to do... old times, and all that... I think I’ll just, erm... Bill? Could you, uh...?”

“I’ve had enough of everyone’s sniggering,” Ron said darkly. “She was there for me, which is more than I can say for either of you. I don’t regret it, not for one moment.”

“ Perhaps you should have spent one moment considering Hermione?” Harry asked with venom in his voice. “You have it out with her, and not an hour later you’re shagging away with someone else... and of all people it had to be Lavender Brown, didn’t it? For Merlin’s sake, Ron...”

Ron lashed out and roughly shoved Harry back against the counter. “What?” he snarled. “Spit it out, you wanker! She must be a ruddy tart because she was interested in me – is that it? I suppose I’m not good enough for the bloody ice maiden... wait, I have it! She has a thing for Seekers, doesn’t she? And I thought she didn’t care for Quidditch! That explains everything... like why she led me on and put me off for two effing years. Do you know the best part – do you? At long last, Harry, you weren’t first in line for something.” He paused for emphasis, and added with an evil grin, “How does it feel to pick up Viktor Krum’s seconds?”

Harry tossed Ron against the island, and balled his fists. “We’re finished – just as soon as I use you for a punching bag,” he warned.

Bill breezed into the kitchen, and abruptly put one arm around Harry’s shoulders and the other around Ron. “Let’s all take a nice stroll, shall we?” he commanded, and drove them forward with surprising strength toward the French door that led out to the yard.

Bill shoved Ron through the door first, and sent him sprawling onto the porch. Harry reacted quickly, but not quickly enough. Bill tripped him, and knocked him flat onto the porch as well. Bill closed the door behind him as if nothing had happened, and then turned on them. “I can’t decide which one of you is the bigger arse!” he boomed. In one motion, he had both Harry and Ron’s wands.

Harry sat up and reached toward Bill, who gripped the wands tightly and growled, “If you even think of summoning your wand, I swear that I’ll conjure a rope. We’ve read the same book, you and I –

remember? Number twelve, I think... and I will enjoy it." Harry quickly settled on discretion and sat on his hands.

Bill glared at Ron. "You – you should never have left the dining room. You went after Harry because you wanted to provoke him. You had no reason, and you had no right!"

Ron argued, "It's his fault – he got in my way, and he knew it! He has a problem with Lavender and me? Where did they go straight away, then?"

Harry seethed, "I was put on probation at school, in case you haven't heard or didn't care. Getting shagged was the last thing on my mind, I can assure you!"

"We weren't shagging!" Ron shouted. "As for the probation thing, I wouldn't worry about that. Dumbledore will bail you out of trouble; wouldn't want his prize pupil to stumble, would he? Anything for the saviour of the bloody universe!"

"Silencio!" Bill screeched. Ron and Harry continued to yell at one another for a moment, until it was obvious that nothing could be heard.

"Five years!" Bill ranted. "Five years of friendship, and the two of you have let it come to this? Harry, you just had to stir the cauldron, didn't you? You didn't think I heard you? The neighbours across the lane heard about Lavender Brown's knickers, you twit! You're concerned with Hermione's feelings? If you gave a tinker's damn about her feelings, then you would have kept your fool mouth closed! Ron, I do hope that you're satisfied – you managed to call her an ice maiden and accuse her of shagging both Viktor Krum and Harry, all in one sitting! Bloody brilliant! But it gets better, doesn't it? Both of her parents were listening in – you must feel like you just caught the effing Snitch! Mum and Dad must be so bloody proud! Git... prat... wanker... none of them quite capture my love at this moment! I'd rather sit down for roast dinner with Percy than look at you! At least I was able to spare Dad the humiliation of dragging you out here!"

Ron's eyes bulged, and his lower lip twitched. Harry wanted to slink off into the yard, but the thought of a conjured rope kept him in place.

Bill turned on Harry. "As for you," he snarled, "I'd grade your opening attempts at adulthood a resounding D... come to think of it, you're not even managing Dreadful. You know what Ron's been through, and I know that you feel responsible for it. Why in Merlin's name do you not make allowances, then? He's not the same person anymore, Harry, and there's nothing to be done about that. Are you going to be the kind of man who gives up on friends when it suits you? If you're going to manage your affairs based solely upon your own convenience, then please be loud and clear. I'll be the first in line to quit on you! And you, Ron – did you hear one word that Harry told us? You're not the only one who... och, the hell with it!"

He crossed his arms. "Stand up – both of you!" he ordered. Neither Harry nor Ron chose to object.

"Right, then," Bill said. "Which one of you plans to throw the first swing?"

Harry eyed Ron warily. For his part, Ron looked as though the very life had been wrung out of him.

"Go on!" Bill exhorted them. "Beat the bloody hell out of one another! That was the plan, right?"

Ron stuck his hands in his pockets, and peered intently at his shoes. Harry slowly shook his head from side to side.

"Do you think you're capable of speech, without cocking it up?" Bill asked. "I'll take your shuffling around as 'yes'. Here's my plan, then. Hestia Jones is going to... have either of you met Hestia? Oy, Hestia!"

A black-haired witch resolved chameleon-like from the wall at the back of the yard, and waved. Harry vaguely remembered her – she had been part of the Advance Guard when he had left the Dursleys the year prior.

Bill raised his voice. "Hestia is going to keep an eye on you. I'm going to release the silencing spell. You can talk things through, you can knock each other senseless, you can hex each other to the moon... at this point, I don't give a care either way. Whatever you choose to do, don't share it with the neighbours. Hestia, feel free to have St. Mungo's collect any survivors."

Hestia sniggered and waved. "Right-o, Bill," she called out.

"I'm allowing you a few minutes, before I return to survey the damage. Perhaps the afternoon can still be salvaged," Bill grumbled. He dropped their wands on the porch, and flicked his own wand once as he passed through the French door. Harry rubbed at his throat, and cleared it audibly.

"Ron... I...I haven't the slightest idea how to fix this," Harry admitted as he picked up the two wands.

Ron blurted in frustration, "I hate feeling this way!"

On one corner of the porch were two benches with high backs, facing either other across a low table. Harry set Ron's wand on the table, and sat down on one of the benches. "It was simple in the beginning, wasn't it?" he said. "Answer the letter, and get to King's Cross on time. We spent the day eating chocolate frogs, and just like that we were there."

Ron laughed grimly. He looked at the bench opposite Harry. "Anyone sitting there?" he asked, pointing at the bench. Harry shook his head, and Ron sat down.

He extended his hand to Harry. "Ron Weasley," he said. "I'm Fred and George's brother. Are you really Harry Potter? I thought it might be one of Fred and George's jokes, you know."

Harry chuckled. "I'm afraid so," he said, as he drew back his bangs to reveal the scar. "You might want to find another seat while you have the chance."

“I’ll stay here for now,” Ron said. “I heard you went to live with Muggles. Are they all right, then?”

Harry answered, “Well, my uncle’s an arse, but my aunt can be tolerable, and my cousin will grow on you... literally. He’s huge.”

Ron smiled, and reached inside his jacket. “Anything off the cart?” he asked, and took two Chocolate Frogs from a pocket.

Harry shook his head. “Carry those around regularly, do you?” he laughed.

Ron shrugged. “I didn’t expect dessert, so I brought my own. Remember how Hermione’s parents would send all that sugarless claptrap? Have you been in the guest bath, by the way? They have spare toothbrushes set out in little boxes, and these odd little spools of white thread.” He shook his head, bemused, and handed a Chocolate Frog to Harry.

Ron unwrapped his Chocolate Frog and glanced at the card. He groaned, and set it face up on the table. “Agrippa – wouldn’t you know it? I would have killed for that card a few years ago. Which did you get?”

Harry managed a wry smile. “Dumbledore,” he said. “Want it?”

“Naw, I really don’t collect anymore. Besides, I must have two dozen of him,” Ron told Harry.

“One is more than enough,” Harry observed. “Any pets? I have a snowy owl.”

Ron scowled, “Just this damn rat named Scabbers.” Harry cringed, and wondered how could he have slipped his mind. Ron took a bite of his frog, and added, “If I’d had any idea what a rat he really was, I would have fed him to the nearest Kneazle before we boarded the train.”

Harry asked, “So what’s your Quidditch team?”

“Chudley Cannons,” Ron said proudly. “You?”

“Cannons, of course,” Harry said quickly. “Things can only improve.”

Ron smiled. “Codswallop,” he said. “You look like a Puddlemere man to me.”

“Nope – Cannons all the way,” Harry insisted. “I always pull for the downtrodden.”

“Ouch,” Ron pouted.

The French door opened, and Ron quickly pocketed his wand. Ginny carefully passed through as though she feared an ambush. “No sign of the enemy,” she mocked. “It looks safe to proceed.”

“Funny,” Hermione said flatly, and followed Ginny onto the porch.

“I think the train’s getting crowded,” Ron said, “and since when did 10 year olds get a ticket?”

Ginny smiled curiously. “How many times did Harry strike you in the head, exactly?” she asked.

“We were just riding the Express to Hogwarts,” Harry explained. “Ron was introducing me to Chocolate Frogs, and I was telling him that I’m the Cannons’ biggest fan.”

“Liar,” Ginny said. “What team do you pull for, anyway? You’re not a Puddlemere man, are you?”

“Shall we sing the Cannons anthem, Ron?” Harry asked.

“Absolutely,” Ron agreed, “provided that you don’t mangle the words. Can it wait, though? I want to toss Scabbers under the wheels first.”

“I’ll gladly help with that,” Hermione said.

Ginny smiled wickedly. She curtsied and extended a hand to Harry. “Hullo. Obviously you’re Harry Potter. I’m Ginny Weasley, and I’m not actually here until next September. May I?” Harry gestured to the benches.

Ginny sat next to him. “I have a tendency to knock over and break things when you’re around, in case my brother hasn’t told you. Some people think that I have a tendency toward questionable judgment –”

Harry sat up with a start. “I’m sorry? What did you say?” he asked.

“You would have to catch that bit, wouldn’t you? I said that I have a tendency toward questionable judgment,” Ginny groaned. She stopped and searched his face. “Are you all right? You have this odd look about you.”

Harry shook it off. “Sorry, it was just... the phrase struck me funny, that’s all.”

Ginny smiled. “No worries,” she said. “Oh, by the way? I’m going to be possessed by the most evil wizard in the world, and a basilisk will bite you when you save me. I just thought I should apologise in advance.” Ron gasped and Hermione looked at her in horror.

Harry said, “I’m sure it all turns out in the end, so I’ll forgive you. Just promise me one thing – no kissing!” He burst out laughing as Ginny’s cheeks pinked, and Ron followed suit.

Hermione looked Harry up and down, and then extended her hand. “You’re Harry Potter, of course. I know all about you,” she said very fast. “You’re in Modern Magical History; Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century; Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts; let’s see... you reputedly have your own chapter in the new revision of Hogwarts: a History; you’re in roughly every other issue of the Daily Prophet – oh! We mustn’t forget Teen Witch Weekly –”

Ron saw the immediate queasiness on Harry's face and cut in, "Someone wants to forget it."

Hermione didn't miss a beat. "...and we mustn't leave aside this people-saving thing of yours. Did I mention that you have a knack for disrupting things – you know, exams...? Quidditch matches...? Evil plots...? Sunday dinners...? I'm Hermione Granger, by the way." She turned to Ron. "And who are you?"

"Ron Weasley," Ron said with a smirk.

"Ah, yes – I've heard about you," Hermione said. "Look, I only came out here because some of the people on the train are behaving very childish. You've got chocolate on your nose, by the way – did you know that?" Ron quickly reached for his nose and Hermione giggled at him.

He shot her a mock-sowl. "Your mum's right – you're not a giggler," he said. "What gives?"

Hermione sat down next to Ron. "I don't know. I used to be; it was a nervous habit. My mother seems to have conveniently forgotten. This whole summer has been a reprise of my life as a ten year old."

"I'm sorry," Ron said.

"It's not your fault," Hermione assured him. "I never expected to be stuck here like this." She looked at Harry, and added, "It must have been awful for you, stuck at the Dursleys. I always knew, but I never understood – not really."

"That's not what I meant," Ron said. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I... dragged you into my problems, and it wasn't right."

Hermione closed her eyes. "I forgive you," she said after a long pause. "The rest will take some time." Ron smiled faintly. He appeared to relax – for the first time all summer, Harry suspected.

Harry quietly cast a series of overlapping silencing charms all around the benches. He watched, until he was certain that the porch was thoroughly covered and that none of his friends had noticed. I hope this isn't a mistake, he thought. Gryffindors go forward.

Harry said, "Ron, can I ask you something?"

"Why not?" Ron replied.

"I'm just curious – how are you going to die?" Harry asked casually.

Ron snorted and shook his head. "On your ruddy motorbike, of all things –" He stopped, and froze in mute shock. Ginny screamed. It was a shrill inhuman scream, and it was something that Harry had failed to thoroughly contemplate. Because of the multiple charms, Ginny's screams rebounded loudly and startled her into silence.

"That was subtle," Hermione said disapprovingly.

Ron babbled. "How did you... wha... I never... you didn't talk to Lavender, did you...? I mean, with all the name-calling..."

Ginny sat very still, her face drained of colour. "Die?" she asked in a child's voice.

"Lavender knows?" Harry asked.

"No one's going to die. We're essentially talking about Divination, after all," Hermione assured Ginny. She changed benches and wrapped her arm around Ginny's shoulders.

"Die?" Ginny wept. "Did those... those things tell you that?"

"I don't understand how you knew," Ron said, his voice almost ghostly.

"We found a book in the library at Grimmauld Place," Harry explained. "It had a page on the brains, Ron. They're called cognivores, apparently." So much for not cocking things up, he

thought as he watched Ron's expression oscillate between anger and terror.

Bill came out the French door, followed by Tonks. He said, "I see everyone's still alive... hullo, I didn't expect to see..." He squinted, and looked carefully around the porch. "You've built a silent space," he said. "That's seventh-year work, at the very least – impressive."

"They didn't teach us that when I was in school," Tonks said. "I picked it up later."

"Hiding the shouting, are you?" Bill asked with a smile. He drew closer and took in Ron's expression; his smile quickly melted away.

Harry motioned to Ginny, and flicked his wand here and there. "Have a seat," he said grimly. Tonks sat on the end of the table, and Bill immediately went to Ginny. Harry began flicking his wand again.

"Where did you pick that up, anyway?" Tonks asked him.

Harry put away his wand. "Dumbledore did it at the party. I don't know how... I felt it, and it occurred to me how he might have done it. It's a good thing I didn't vanish the porch, I suppose."

Ginny clung to Bill as if she were drowning. Harry couldn't understand anything she said – it was all buried deep within sobs. Bill turned his head toward Harry. "I take it that you were right, in the library?" he confirmed. Harry nodded.

Tonks said to Ron, "I'm sorry, Ron. We hoped otherwise, truly we did."

Ron asked anxiously, "Who else knows about this?"

Hermione answered, "Remus saw the book, but he doesn't know what you saw. We were only surmising, after all. My parents saw the book as well."

Panic rose in Ron's voice. "They wouldn't tell my parents... would they? Mum's wound tightly as it is."

"They understand that it's a matter between you and your family; I'm certain of it," Hermione said.

"It's between you and me, as far as I'm concerned," Bill assured Ron. "Mum wouldn't handle it well, and Dad has enough on his mind at present. Charlie doesn't need to know, the twins can't keep their mouths shut, and Percy... well... you know."

"It's very, very questionable," Hermione insisted. "Visions are dodgy at the outset, never mind the possible intent of these creatures."

"What did the book say about them?" Ron asked.

"Ron, perhaps we should take this a step at a time –" Bill began.

"What did the book say?" Ron demanded.

"It's not good," Harry told him. "Are you sure...?"

"What did it say? Tell me," Ron pleaded.

Hermione suggested, "Bill may have a point, you know." Ron and Harry both glared at her.

"I can't keep track of all the secrets anymore," Harry said. He turned to Ron. "They're called *Cognivorus cado... cado...*"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "They're called *Cognivorum cadogansis*, after Sir Cadogan. Apparently, he was believed to have killed them all. Clearly, that wasn't the case."

"Sir Cadogan... Sir Cadogan... Wasn't that the crusader bloke who filled in for the Fat Lady – 'tally ho' and that rot?" Ron asked. When Hermione nodded, he added, "Struck me as a braggart, that one."

Harry continued, "According to the book, cognivores feed on thoughts and they leave visions of the future."

Hermione corrected him, "No, victims are beset with visions of the future." When Harry looked at her askance, she snipped, "It's a significant difference. It implies the potential for false visions."

"Fair enough," Harry acknowledged. "These things went on a rampage a hundred years ago. They attacked seventy people. Half of them died, and the other half..." He couldn't make himself finish the thought.

"The other half what?" Ron asked impatiently.

"The other half went mad," Hermione said. Before Ron could respond, she hastily added, "Of course, the book said over seventy people were attacked, and only thirty-four ended up at St. Mungo's. That means some of the victims may have been unaffected."

Ron began to laugh in staccato heaves. Harry and the others all watched him cautiously. He spluttered, "When I said I thought I might be going mad... I wasn't entirely serious, you know."

Harry spoke slowly, assembling his thoughts as he talked. "Maybe – just maybe – they went mad because they couldn't handle what they thought they saw, not because of anything actually done to them."

"The deaths may have been self-fulfilling prophecy," Bill agreed hopefully.

"There's a word I don't care to hear again soon – prophecy," Ron fumed. "Answer me this, O high priestess of the library; if Divination is so flimsy, then why was that sodding prophecy so important?"

Hermione gasped and shuddered. She started to speak, but only guttural sounds emerged. Harry immediately moved toward her.

"What?" Ron said, a guilty look spreading across his face. "What did I do? All I did was ask about the prophecy; it's not –"

“Stop!” Harry shouted. “Can’t you see what you’re doing to her? Don’t say another word!” He pulled her to him. “It’s safe, I promise. It’s safe,” he repeated himself over and over.

“Can’t... it’s not right... have to... tell Professor... D-Dumbledore,” Hermione managed; her voice quavered as she shook.

Tonks moved to take Hermione’s hand. “What’s happening to you? What can we do?”

“I’m putting an end to this,” Harry said. “Ron, I told you there would be no more secrets. Listen, all of you. Can I trust you?”

Everyone sat mute, caught up in Hermione’s writhing.

“Can I trust you?” Harry repeated. “Dumbledore believes this is a life-or-death matter. Can I trust you?”

“I told you that I can keep a secret,” Ron replied.

“The Order is sworn to protect you,” Bill said. “You have my word.”

“Likewise,” said Tonks.

Ginny nodded nervously.

“Hermione was willing to guard this secret with her life,” Harry said. “If any of you betray us, I swear that I’ll kill you myself.” Hermione looked up at him, her eyes wide with surprise.

He looked around for assent once more. “I won’t let you die to protect this from our own friends, for Merlin’s sake,” he told Hermione.

Hermione quavered, “Not dying... just... not right... are you... sure... you...?” She shuddered, and Harry’s hand tingled.

He spoke the prophecy – all of it. “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches - born to those who have thrice

defied him, born as the seventh month dies. The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not, and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives. The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies.” Moments after he finished, Hermione’s body relaxed.

“How did you know...?” she began weakly.

“I didn’t know if it would help,” Harry admitted. “I took a chance. Dumbledore said you would only be able to speak of the prophecy in front of people who already knew it.”

Ron and Ginny stared slack-jawed at Harry, and Bill took on a pensive expression.

Tonks said, “Sweet Merlin... you’re the Defender. It makes sense, when I think about it, but... you’re the Defender.”

“The ‘Defender’? What are you talking about?” Harry asked.

“The central purpose of the Order of the Phoenix is to protect and support the Defender of the Light – the person who is fated to vanquish Voldemort,” Bill explained. “The secondary purpose is to protect the lives of those whom Voldemort and the Death Eaters have marked for destruction. That obviously includes you, Harry; and Hermione as well. Dumbledore’s always maintained that the identity of the Defender was unknown. Frankly, most of us assumed that it was him, and he was just being modest.” He turned to Ron and then Ginny. “If Mum finds out you know that, or anything else about the Order, she’ll serve all of us for roast dinner – understood?”

Ron stared at the table, his face cradled in his hands. Harry watched him as his fingers flicked to and fro. “Playing chess, are you?” he asked.

“ ‘Either must die at the hand of the other’... ‘neither can live while the other survives’... ‘power the Dark Lord knows not’... what a puzzle,” Ron muttered. He looked up at Harry, and then sat up

abruptly. “‘Either must die at the hand of the other’ – think of the implications. If he doesn’t kill you, will you be immortal? Is it impossible for someone or something else to kill you? If you were to walk in front of the Knight Bus tomorrow, would it just bounce off you or something? So... he can’t order someone to kill you, can he? He has to dirty his own hands – or does he? What does it mean to use one’s hands? Can he be killed using a wand, or does it have to be done with the hands... could it mean wandless magic? ‘Neither can live while the other survives’ – what in the wide world of Quidditch does that mean? With him it makes a bit of sense, you having offed him and all. You can’t live? That makes no sense at all – you look alive to me... if you were undead, I think we would have caught on by now. ‘Power the Dark Lord knows not’ – now that’s interesting. You can kill him with a spell he’s unfamiliar with, perhaps? It’s all a great puzzle.”

Ginny gaped at him. “That was impressive!”

Hermione stirred and turned to look at Ron. “Nicely done,” she said. “That gives us something to work with.”

Bill patted him on the shoulder, and Tonks raised both thumbs in salute. Ron looked questioningly at Harry.

“Good show, mate,” Harry said. Ron visibly relaxed.

“V-Voldemort doesn’t know Harry has the power to kill him – is that the big secret?” Ginny asked nervously.

Hermione sat up slowly, stretched gingerly, and mouthed ‘thank you’ to Harry. She said, “Voldemort doesn’t know that he has to come after Harry himself, and he doesn’t know that he can’t live as long as Harry survives. We need to keep him in the dark as long as possible. You can surely see that Harry’s life may depend on it.” Ginny paled.

Harry asked, “Does anyone have a problem with the idea that I have to kill him?” He raised his own hand, and was met with a chorus of ‘no’s.

“Would anyone feel differently if they had to do it?” Harry asked.

Ron said, “I’d blast him to ashes, and then burn the ashes. I wouldn’t give it a single thought.”

Bill said, “He’s earned it.”

“It’s war,” shrugged Tonks. “People die.”

Ginny squeezed Harry’s hand. “No one in his or her right mind would ever blame you,” she said. “We’ll all be there for you afterward.” She looked pointedly at Ron, and added, “All of us.”

Bill said to Ginny and Ron, “I hate to break this up, but we should all get back inside; it’s the civilised thing to do.” He turned to Hermione. “It’s obvious that something was done to you, relating to this prophecy – a safeguard or binding of some kind? I need to know more about it; I’d like to help.” Finally, he shook Harry’s hand. “We’re sworn to support and protect you, Harry. It’s... it’s an honour, strange as that may sound to you. You may want to get used to that sentiment.”

Ron said, “We’ll be right there. I have a few things yet to clear up with Harry.” When Hermione hesitated, he added, “Alone. Don’t fret; there’s no punching involved.”

Harry held back until the French door closed. “What is it?”

Ron said calmly, “You don’t expect to live, do you?”

Harry couldn’t bring himself to lie. “No, not really.”

“Neither do I,” said Ron.

“I’ll take him with me, though,” Harry promised.

“I expect that you will,” Ron told him, “and I intend to help you, whether you like it or not.”

Harry asked nervously, "Have you... did you see something that...?"

"Two things that I saw have already happened this summer – that's how I know it's real," Ron whispered. He looked around furtively, as if he were afraid of being heard. "Most of it is hazy now. All that damn Oblivious Unction did was to muddle things. Some of it's clear – the motorbike, for one. You're there; so is Hermione, I think, and someone else – a blonde who I can't recognise. I saw myself in a mirror, near the end. I don't look a lot older than now. It's coming, Harry – it's coming soon." He leaned in close to Harry's ear. "They think I'm already mad, you know; I overheard them at St. Mungo's. They couldn't bring themselves to tell me. Thank you for that much."

"You're not mad. I don't know if what you saw is real, but you're not mad," Harry said.

"You may be the only one with that opinion," Ron fumed.

"So... we go down together, then?" Harry asked.

Ron paused, and appeared to mull over the idea. "I could live with that," he decided.

Harry didn't think Ron was mad, but he knew that it was possible. He was certain at first that Ron was paranoid; the furtive glances, the whispering – it all pointed in that direction. After a few minutes back inside the house, he had changed his mind somewhat. Mr. and Mr. Weasley behaved as though neither wanted to be the first to call out "Snap!" He began to wonder if Hermione had misjudged her parents, and if anything had actually been shared between them and the Weasleys. Tonks was on uneasy ground with both Ron and Harry. She seemed to be moving in a room filled with breakables, although in her case that was often a reasonable assumption. Ginny's countenance cried out 'stiff upper lip', but Harry could see it in her eyes – the impulse to cry out, barely suppressed. He felt badly for heaping Ron's condition and the truth of the prophecy upon her in the space of five minutes. Considering that, he concluded that she was the picture of grace. As for Ron, if he wasn't precisely relaxed, he at least seemed relieved. He moved easily, despite the rustling and

nervousness around him. He was gentle and attentive with Ginny – clearly worried about her, and not just about what she might do or say. Harry was certain that she'd earned that from Ron after the last few weeks.

Hermione and Bill huddled in the front room and spoke in hushed tones, she on one end of a settee and he in a plush armchair. Hermione waved him over, and Harry broke off from Mr. Granger. Harry sat next to Hermione; she appeared anxious.

Bill said quietly, "Harry, I need you to tell me anything that you can remember about the safeguard cast on Hermione – anything at all."

"I'm a bit hazy on that entire evening, as you can imagine," Hermione explained.

Harry nodded. "Dumbledore said it was a variation on an old spell. There was quite a bit of wand work involved, and some runes on her hand and mine, and then a long incantation... *arcanum se astringo dum* something, and then a variation on the same. Then he said *tutela*, and I thought he was going to force his wand right through Hermione's chest."

Bill raised an eyebrow. He reached out for Harry's hand. "Runes? May I?" Harry allowed him to look, and he came away with a scowl. "I imagine it was *dum dolor*, Harry," he said. "Please tell me the rest wasn't something along the lines of *arcanum se astringo donec nex*?" Harry felt a chill on the back of his neck.

"Was she ill following the casting of the... er, was she ill afterward?" Bill asked.

"She was terribly cold," Harry answered. "I could scarcely warm her."

"But you could – you could warm her?" Bill said. He turned to Hermione. "You're not cold now, are you?"

"I feel all right. Casting of the what?" Hermione asked.

“I’m sorry?” said Bill.

“Casting of the what?” she repeated. “You started to ask if I was ill following the casting of the... something. Why did you stop?”

Bill didn’t answer. “Does your hand hurt when Hermione is out of sorts?”

“It tingles, I think, but it doesn’t really hurt,” Harry answered suspiciously.

“Did Dumbledore say where he learned this?” asked Bill.

“From someone at the Department of Mysteries, I think,” Harry replied after a pause.

Hermione agreed. “He’s right. I do remember that much. Look, Bill, I agreed to this.”

The growing alarm on Bill’s face prompted Harry to add, “He did say that the charm wasn’t evil, and couldn’t cause any lasting harm.”

Bill frowned. “He does like to emphasize the difference between dark and evil. As I said before, I would trust Dumbledore with my life. Nonetheless, I can’t accept... surely he had to realise what he was undertaking.”

Hermione appeared impassive. Harry snapped, “What was he doing, then? Did he lie to us?”

“He mislead you, at any rate. I respectfully disagree with his interpretation of lasting harm,” Bill fumed. “I can’t fathom what he was thinking, casting a barely-legal variation of an ancient Unforgivable on a schoolgirl. He’s going to explain himself to me and to the Order if I have anything to say about it. I intend to break this curse, and I’ll damn well know who provided the runes.”

“You shouldn’t interfere,” Hermione said. “He had his reasons.”

Harry seethed. "He cursed you," he said. "I can't believe that he cursed you."

"I was the weak link in the chain," she said distantly. "He did what was necessary."

Harry desperately clutched her shoulders with his hands. His voice shook. "Is everyone losing their minds around here? Hermione, have you gone stark – barking – mad?"

There was sudden pounding at the front door. Bill jumped up from the armchair, and flicked his wand. A small portion of the oaken door was rendered transparent, to reveal Lupin and Fred Weasley standing on the other side.

"You'll have to teach me that one," Harry said, impressed. "That's dead useful..." He went silent the instant that he spotted the gashes on Fred's head and the long rips across his shirt.

Bill shouted, "Dad!" and flung open the door. He quickly ushered Lupin and Fred into the front room, slammed the door, and called out, "Colloportus!" He looked to Harry and Hermione, and shouted, "Get up - now!" The moment that they stood, the settee flung itself across the room and landed directly in front of the door.

Mr. Weasley ran into the front room. "Fred! What... who did this?"

"Death Eaters..." Fred panted. "They - they stormed the Burrow."

Chapter Fourteen

HEARTBURN

Mrs. Weasley stopped cold at the sight of Fred. Harry half-expected her to collapse, but she instead assumed a calm demeanour rather unlike the woman that he knew. "I'll get a cloth," she said, and returned to the kitchen.

"Where is George?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"The Lovegoods were attacked as well. We fetched Madam Pomfrey, and George stayed behind," Fred said.

Mrs. Granger followed Mrs. Weasley into the room. She showed no sign of panic whatever; this woman is all business, Harry thought.

"Sorry about the carpet, ma'am," Fred said meekly.

"That's a low priority at the moment," Mrs. Granger said. "You need to stop talking while we attend to your cheek. If I can get pressure on..."

"Pressure?" Mrs. Weasley asked. "Oh, of course – you're stopping the blood flow, aren't you?"

"Sorry, Molly," Lupin said. "I gave it a go, but my – er – condition takes the edge off of healing charms."

Mrs. Weasley gently moved Mrs. Granger's hands away. "Allow me," she said kindly. With two flicks of the wand, the bleeding stopped.

Mrs. Granger shook her head. "For the first time, I think I'm truly jealous," she said. "You could charge five hundred pounds for that, you know."

"And the NHS would keep all but five pounds of it," Mr. Granger added. "I'll fetch a clean shirt for him, Molly." He was fully as collected as his wife.

“Did you say that the Lovegoods were attacked?” Ginny asked from the doorway.

“Mr. Lovegood has a nasty head wound, and Luna...” Fred stopped.

“What about Luna?” Harry asked.

“Oh, Harry – they tore into her something awful,” Fred cried. “Thank Merlin that George can keep his head about him. She... she sent you a note, insisted on it. It looked like she was ready to owl it, before the attack.” He held out a crumpled bit of parchment.

Mrs. Granger took the parchment, and handed it off to Harry. He read it, and then read it again.

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“They’re coming here next,” Harry said angrily.

“That’s not possible. Wizards can’t even see this house, excepting members of the Order,” Bill said. “I’m proud of these wards.”

“Dad,” Fred said, “They shouldn’t have found the Burrow, either. George had a thought – perhaps they’re looking for gnomes?”

Lupin’s eyes widened. “Does anyone know if...?”

Tonks frowned. “I de-gnomed the garden here last week. The area’s ripe with them; they’re definitely attracted to the wards.”

Mr. Weasley paled for an instant, and then took command. “Remus, rally everyone you can – go!”

“I’ve already put word to Albus,” Lupin said as he hustled out the front door.

“Bill, Fred, you’re with me; we’ll plan a perimeter,” Mr. Weasley went on. “Tonks, get Hestia from the yard – we want to pull in close to the house. Molly, set up a safe room upstairs. Everyone else goes with Molly. We defend Harry and the Grangers to the death, if necessary. If they come, we’ll make sure that they regret that choice.” No one hesitated. Harry was startled by Mr. Weasley’s presence. At some level, he’d always assumed that Molly Weasley was the official cook for the Order and that Arthur Weasley was the parliamentarian or something of that nature.

Harry recovered quickly. “Mr. Weasley, I am an adult. I expect to be put to work,” he insisted.

Mr. Weasley frowned. “You’re sixteen years old,” he said briskly. “Until Kingsley tells us you’re trained up, you’re with Ron, Ginny and Hermione.”

“If Voldemort comes, I have to be with you,” Harry said. Hermione twitched, and her knees buckled. Mr. Granger, who was coming down the stairs, dropped the shirt that he was carrying and rushed to her.

“If Voldemort comes, we’ll need Dumbledore,” Mr. Weasley said.

“In the end, Dumbledore won’t be able to help you,” Harry assured him. “You’ll need me.”

“Harry, dear, we know you’ve faced him, but Dumbledore...” Mrs. Weasley began.

“Dumbledore can’t kill him,” Harry said. “I can. I’m the only one who can. Do you understand?”

Mr. Weasley hesitated. “You?” he asked. “It’s you?”

“Wicked,” Fred said quietly.

“Hermione... wake up, Hermione,” Mr. Granger said gently. When there was no response, he turned and announced, “I think she’s

having a seizure! Cordelia, fetch the bag from the study; I need a tongue depressor – now.”

Harry stood and spoke the prophecy, every word of it. “I’m the one,” he added. “I was born on the last day of the seventh month. My parents defied him three times. I was marked with the lightning scar. That’s what all this is about. That’s why everyone around me is in constant danger.” Hermione gasped for air, and curled into a foetal position.

Harry turned to Mr. Granger. “That’s why you need to take her and go, as far away as you can. No matter what happens here, you need to go.”

“Harry, I...” Mr. Granger began.

From the floor, Hermione moaned, “Why don’t you just take out an advertisement in the Daily Prophet?”

“Thank Merlin,” Harry said. He moved quickly to help her stand up.

“Don’t you presume to make decisions for me,” snarled Hermione, shaking off Harry’s help.

“Look, you can hate me later,” Harry said. “We need to talk about Luna’s note – now, while there’s still time.”

“What else could it possibly say that outweighs...?” Hermione began.

“Harry, you’ve just given us even more reason to protect you,” Mr. Weasley said. “Upstairs, now – off you go, the lot of you!”

Harry helped Hermione – who was clearly unsteady – ascend the stairs, and he motioned to Ron and Ginny. He led them all into the first guest room, and closed the door before the Grangers or Mrs. Weasley could follow. As soon as she sat on the end of the bed, he thrust the note at Hermione and hoped that he appeared calm... or

normal... or something less than flaming crimson. She shot him a dubious look, and then read it.

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I'm sure that No-Name knows. We certainly didn't see the Godfather. Ask the one in the strapless dress. Better still, ask the one in the white bathrobe. I hope you understand, or there will be terrible trouble – even for the one sorely in need of a longer skirt, I think. Sorry I didn't write sooner – I took quite a long fall, and just awoke.

TTFN,

Butterbeer Cap

- - - - -

The note shook in her hand. "That was... you mean that... we were all there? And he wasn't Sirius... he was... Oh! You... I mean, we... Good Lord, we didn't... we couldn't have... could we...?" Tears formed at the corners of her eyes.

Ginny seized the note. She read it several times, and her face fell further each time. "Gods," she said at last, "it was real. It wasn't Sirius, it was Voldemort. Sirius wouldn't have cut me to the quick like that – I knew it!" She looked at Hermione with an unreadable expression. "It was you, then. I disappeared, and he settled on you." She turned to Harry. "Unless it was Daphne Greengrass... please lie to me if that's the case!"

"Daphne Greengrass? What the... let me see that," Ron demanded. He read the note, looked up in confusion, and read it again. "What kind of game is this?" he asked. "Strapless dresses, bathrobes, skirts – this doesn't make any sense whatever. What does she mean, that she 'took quite a long fall'? And who the bloody hell is No-Name...? All right – never mind that part."

"Fred said the note was to be owled," Harry said. "It's intentionally vague – and well thought on her part." He waited for Hermione to

agree – she typically paid compliment to intellect, after all – but agreement didn't come.

Hermione hugged her knees to her chest. "It couldn't have been real. It was just a dream – please tell me it was just a dream," she said. Her cheeks were damp.

"Luna was wearing a silver dress with sparkles. She had a copy of the Quibbler," Harry said gently.

Ginny shuddered. "I had this horrid strapless thing on. I changed into a jumper and denims. As for Greengrass... what she was wearing is no one's business."

Ron appeared to suppress a fatuous grin. "In need of a longer skirt, right? Well, that's a matter of opinion... er... sorry, Hermione; no offence meant."

Hermione snapped at Ron, "How can you sit there and think about Daphne Greengrass's skirt? Death Eaters attacked Luna, in case you missed that bit of news! It was Voldemort, you thick prat! Voldemort pulled us into Harry's dream, or pulled all of us inside his own head, or who knows what else? Voldemort dressed me in Harry's bathrobe, and paraded me around –"

Ron's eyes narrowed slightly. "Harry's bathrobe?" he asked no one in particular.

Harry watched her carefully. He felt a strong urge to wipe the tears from her face, but thought better of it. 'Please tell me it was just a dream', she said. That tells me where I stand, he recognised.

Hermione glared back at him with pure venom. She shouted, "How could you let him in? How could you let him do this? How could you? I thought you had defences! I thought you would protect us! I thought..." She looked away from him, and quietly finished, "I thought you would protect me."

“I don’t know how it happened, Hermione. I didn’t know that it happened at all, until just now. I didn’t feel him inside my head,” Harry tried to explain. “I think... I think I had a headache, but it wasn’t the same as – you know – as when my scar hurts.”

“I had a splitting headache when I woke up,” Ginny recalled.

“When you woke up... how is it that you were asleep, anyway?” Harry asked. “It was late morning, right?”

Ginny crossed her arms. “It’s the summertime. I slept in.”

Harry played out his thought. “What about Luna, I wonder... or Daphne Greengrass? We had to be asleep all at once...”

“Then we were inside that monster’s head,” Hermione cried. “We were inside his head – you and I... we were in his head... he was there - watching!”

“Will someone clue me in?” Ron asked. “There was a dream, obviously. All of you apparently thought it was yours, which must have been rather confusing.”

“I still think it was my dream,” Harry said. He described the circumstances in detail, stopping at the point where all but Hermione disappeared. Ron didn’t easily grasp the concept of a game show, but did pick up on the sequence of events. Ginny and Hermione listened with interest, especially to the first portions of the dream.

Ron suggested, “Perhaps you were dreaming about Sirius, and Voldemort found a way in. I rather doubt he subscribes to Teen Witch Weekly, but his followers –”

“Or their children,” Hermione said icily.

Harry took the meaning. “There’s no reason whatever to suggest that Daphne set up this situation,” he insisted.

“We’re on a first name basis now, are we? You’d better not be leaving out any prelude to the dream – anything whatever that Ginny or I missed,” grumbled Hermione.

“You’re aware of anything that may have been left out,” Harry said carefully. Hermione faced away from him.

“As I was saying, Voldemort found out about the article,” Ron continued. “For whatever reason, he wanted to narrow the field – but why?”

“He wants to hurt me,” Harry said. “Voldemort said that he wants my rage. Dumbledore didn’t know why – or if he did, then he saw fit not to tell me.”

Ginny appeared confused. “He wants your rage? Whatever for?”

“It was ‘rage’, specifically? Not anger or pain, but ‘rage’?” Ron asked. Harry nodded.

Ron went somewhere else – Harry recognised his chess match demeanour again. “What is it, Ron?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” he said distantly. “It’s...” His eyes focussed on Harry. “It’s a puzzle that I intend to solve,” he said resolutely.

They heard the unmistakeable sound of breaking glass. “You’d best solve it quickly, then,” Hermione urged.

The door to the room burst open. “Come! Now!” Mrs. Weasley barked. She herded Ginny and Hermione and forced Ron down the hallway toward the master bedroom. Harry stood firm.

“I’m going to fight,” he said firmly. “It won’t do to interfere.”

Mrs. Weasley took a half step backward. “Please, Harry... please do as I say.”

He shook his head. “I intend to defend these stairs,” he said.

Her eyes grew misty. "Please," she begged him.

"I'm with Harry, Mum," Ron said from behind her, and she sagged in defeat.

"They need you," Harry said, pointing toward the master bedroom. "You have to protect them."

"Mum, don't let Ginny out of your sight," Ron said. "No matter what happens, keep her away from us."

"Be safe," Mrs. Weasley whispered, and raced for the master bedroom. They heard the squelch of the door sealing before they reached the base of the stairs.

"I'm with you to the end, Harry," Ron told him.

"Seeing as how we're about to be attacked by Death Eaters, that's not exactly reassuring," Harry said casually. "How's your conjuring?"

Ron shrugged. "I don't know – not bad. I managed well enough on the O.W.L.s. Why?"

"I need work – nothing that I conjure seems to last very long. I tell you, I'd give a small fortune for a pocket mirror," Harry said. He pressed himself against the wall of the stairwell, and Ron followed suit.

"A pocket mirror? I don't need a fortune," Ron said. "How about a bottle of Ogden's?"

"Firewhisky? Are you daft?" Harry asked.

"No," Ron answered. "Just thirsty." He tapped his wand to his palm, and called out, "Creo pocket mirror!"

“Cripes, Ron! Are you trying to rouse the dead?” Harry whispered frantically. “It’s not an exam – just say it and concentrate... what colour is that - pink?”

Ron frowned. “It’s salmon, I think. Take the damn mirror,” he grumbled quietly. “What do you want with it, anyway? Checking your grooming before battle?”

“Something I saw done the other day,” Harry whispered. Thank you, Remus, he thought, as he eased the mirror around the edge of the stairwell.

“That’s clever,” Ron whispered back appreciatively.

As he slowly rotated the mirror, Harry asked, “Why did you tell your mother to stick with Ginny? Did you figure that Hermione could handle her parents?”

“I’m not going to die today,” Ron said with certainty. “That means you’re not going to die today, nor is Hermione. I don’t know about Ginny, so it stands to reason that Mum should focus on her.” Harry wanted to quibble with Ron’s idea of ‘reason’, but thought better of it.

There was no one to the right that they could see. The settee was still in front of the oaken door, but the large window adjacent to the door was broken and the floor of the front room was littered with shards of glass.

“Bloody quiet,” Ron whispered in Harry’s ear. Harry jumped, but stopped himself before he leapt from the stairwell. “Sorry,” Ron added. Where did everyone go? Harry wondered. An explosion echoed from the yard, followed by the crackle of powerful spells.

“Shall we?” Harry asked.

Ron hesitated. “I don’t like it.”

“It is too quiet,” Harry admitted.

Ron shook his head. "That's not what I mean... all the pawns have been drawn forward, and the King is exposed... I think it's a minority attack."

He looked up the stairs, just as the clatter of shattering glass echoed down from the bedrooms.

"I was afraid of that!" Ron shouted, and he scrambled up the stairs ahead of Harry. A red blast of light shot just over his head, and Ron flattened himself against the steps.

Harry crawled up behind him. "Has it occurred to you that a person can be hurt very badly, without dying?"

Ron grunted, "What doesn't kill you only makes you stronger, right? Stupefy!" Harry heard the whump of a Death Eater hitting the floor. "Who said that, anyway?" Ron added. He abruptly jumped up and ran madly down the hallway, amidst a hail of red flashes.

Harry scrambled to the top of the steps, and pointed his wand. "Percussum!" he shouted, and whipped his wand across the path of a Death Eater unlucky enough to step out of one of the bedrooms. The Death Eater's head snapped around, and ground to a halt against the opposite wall.

"I like that one!" Ron shouted. "Percussum!" The Death Eater he struck shook his head vigorously, and raised a hand to his cheek.

"With authority, Ron!" Harry urged him on.

"Percussum!" Ron roared, and dropped the shaken Death Eater atop one of his felled colleagues. "Yes!" he shouted triumphantly, pumping his fist.

"What's that sound?" Harry asked, looking up and down the hall for the source.

"I don't know," Ron answered.

The ceiling split open, and a Death Eater hopped from the attic into the hall.

“Stupefy!” Harry called from one end of the hall. “Percussum!” Ron called from the other end. The Death Eater spun a full circle, and fell flat on his back.

“I hadn’t thought of the ceiling,” Ron said tentatively.

Harry heard the sound again, and he was certain that this time it came from the master bedroom. He wiped sweat from his eyes with the back of one hand, and waved his wand with the other.

“Move!” he shouted at Ron. The instant that Ron was clear, Harry thrust his wand toward the master bedroom door.

“Everbero!” he boomed. The door shook, followed by a loud squelch, a pop!, and a crack! It landed inside the room, in five sections and some bits.

One Death Eater lay on the floor, beneath two sections of the door. A second clumsily exchanged wand fire with Mrs. Weasley. Ginny stood in front of the Grangers’, her eyes trained on the doorway and wand at the ready. Hermione called out “Stupefy!” and narrowly missed Harry, who was racing down the hall toward the room; he heard someone behind him fall.

Another Death Eater leaned out of the widening hole in the master bedroom ceiling just as Harry ran into the room. A purple flash narrowly missed Hermione, and the bottoms of Harry’s glasses fogged. He barked “Percutio!”, with his wand directed at the leaning Death Eater’s arm. Hermione recoiled as blood flew in spatters and the Death Eater’s wand fell.

It seemed to Harry as if time had somehow slowed. Harry grabbed the bleeding Death Eater by the injured arm, and pulled. He heard a shriek of pain echo in the distance. Stay away from them – all of them! he screamed inside. Harry grabbed handfuls of the Death

Eater's cloak and threw him. Harry didn't know why the Death Eater, who was obviously taller and larger than he, flew across the room and bounced off the wall. He didn't care. A guttural cry of... of something – not pain... anger, perhaps – resonated in his ears. He picked up the Death Eater and tossed him through the window glass. He turned to see the remaining Death Eater facing him, wand lowered. Mrs. Weasley gaped at him. Ron stood frozen in the doorway.

Mr. Granger stepped out nonchalantly from behind Ginny – who was also unmoving; he walked up and without hesitation swung a cricket bat into the back of the last Death Eater's head.

“Stokely House School, class of '66,” he said as he prodded the fallen Death Eater with his foot. “I was a rather good batsman.”

Harry heard him distantly, and tried to speak but couldn't. The room swam before it resolved again and returned to a normal speed. Hermione appeared to be holding up her mother, although Mrs. Granger didn't look injured.

Mrs. Weasley spluttered, “I don't... that door was warded... and you threw... how did you...and the window... he should have bounced right off...”

Harry saw movement through the hole in the ceiling. “There's no time for this,” he said. There was more movement, in the hallway. “Ron!”

Ron dove to the floor, and began exchanging wand fire with another Death Eater. Ginny moved to join him.

“Get back, Ginny!” Ron shouted. “Percutio!” A shriek of pain resounded from the hall, followed by a hail of red flashes.

“Ron! No curses, only charms!” Mrs. Weasley protested in vain. Ron ignored her. It was obvious that there were no longer any rules - no objectives save survival.

“Where are my saddlebags?” Harry asked. “Where were they put?”

“In our closet,” Mr. Granger said. “Over there.” Harry burst into the closet and tore through his bags.

“Where are they all coming from?” Mrs. Weasley asked. “He can’t possibly have this many followers.” Hermione tore the hood and mask from the Death Eater at her father’s feet.

Ginny covered her mouth in shock. “It’s Vincent Crabbe!”

“He’s enlisting children now,” Mrs. Weasley moaned.

“Let me guess who’s in the hall, then,” Ron shouted. “Why don’t you stick your head out, cousin? It must be you – you’re never far from your goons! Is Goyle in a heap out there, or did Harry put him through the window?”

Harry peered out the door into the hallway. The end of a wand appeared from the guest room door, and pointed toward the hole in the ceiling. A muffled voice drawled “Morsmordre!” and green sparks flew through the hole toward the sky beyond.

Ron yelled, “I knew it! I knew it, you bloody ferret! Is your daddy proud of his little Death Eater?”

Instantly, there was shouting from above. “Who did that? Have you gone mad? Our Lord will have your head for that, whoever you are!”

Harry tried to understand why, and after a moment believed that he did. This is as close to a cliff as we’re likely to come, Narcissa, he thought. “There’s a safe place!” he shouted. “Don’t forget the safe place!” There was the sound of scurrying, and then nothing.

Ron smacked Harry on the top of his head. “What are you thinking?”

“The Aurors will spot the Dark Mark, you git,” Harry said. “It had to be on purpose.” The Bonnevillie enlarged between the bed and the broken window. Ron pressed himself against the wall near the door.

“I’ll survey our situation,” Harry said. He hopped on the motorbike, grabbed the handlebars, and lined himself up with the window.

“In broad daylight?” Mrs. Weasley piped up.

“It’s a bit late to think of the neighbours now,” Harry said. “I’m surprised that the Muggle constables haven’t yet come.”

Harry heard Mrs. Granger remark, “He should be wearing his helmet,” just as he shot out the window. He immediately turned hard to the left and swooped over the roof, knocking off two Death Eaters before they understood what they were seeing.

Mr. Weasley, Fred, Bill, Tonks and Hestia Jones were all in the yard. Mr. Weasley and Bill were duelling Death Eaters in the open. Tonks had taken position in a tree, and was attempting to pick off the duellers. The high-backed benches were reorganized as cover and Fred and Hestia Jones were crouched behind, taking periodic shots as well. Collectively, they appeared outnumbered by about three to one. One Death Eater at the rear of the yard was clearly in three pieces. It took Harry a few moments to realise that he had seen his first actual splinching – the splinchee must have tried to Apparate directly onto the property, Harry assumed.

Harry buzzed two Death Eaters who were closing in behind Mr. Weasley, which allowed Tonks to drop them both. As he swung around again, he saw two more Death Eaters step through the French door, and stun both Fred and Hestia Jones unconscious. There are more in the house! he thought, and panic began to flow through him.

Two red flashes shot out of the master bedroom window. Harry raced toward the window at full speed. When he arrived, no one remained in the room. He tore over the top of the house. There were a half dozen Death Eaters entering through the front door. One looked up and saw him, and fired curses madly in his direction. He slipped back over the top of the house again, to find another Death Eater firing at him. Tonks was the only one still standing; Mr. Weasley and Bill lay unconscious and bound at the feet of the Death Eater who was

targeting him. Harry shot toward the tree where Tonks held three Death Eaters at bay, cursing “Percutio!” over and over until all three lay still in the grass. The Bonnevillie abruptly lurched, and it occurred to Harry that it had been struck – just before he hit the ground and slid hard into the low wall that bounded the yard.

“Harry Potter? Can you hear me? I’m certain that you can. I know that you’re conscious – I can feel it,” the smooth voice said.

Harry opened one eye. His hands were tied tightly behind his back and his ankles were bound together. He was sitting on the settee in the Grangers’ front room. The figure before him could have been a Dementor – it was clad in long dark robes with head fully cloaked and hands hidden. The voice didn’t sound exactly right, but Harry knew who it was.

“Hello, Tom,” he spat. “You’re late for dinner.”

Soft chuckles emanated from within the cloak. “You’re trying to bait me – how charming. I’m sorry, but that little dig only works for Dumbledore.”

Harry growled, “What have you done with –”

“Your paramour, Miss Granger? She’s alive, for the moment. Wormtail!”

“Yes, my Lord?” Wormtail asked, approaching with obvious caution.

“You have outdone yourself, my slave,” Voldemort said.

“Thank you, my Lord – it was all to your glory,” said Pettigrew.

“Yes, it was. It is a coincidence that so many parties of interest were gathered, to be sure... but I award you credit nonetheless,” Voldemort pronounced. “Which captive would you care to kill?”

Wormtail looked away from his master. “He is not here, my Lord,” he said with obvious disappointment.

“If he arrives, then you may have him. If not, then choose another. You will leave the Weasley girl – she lives. Consider it payment for services rendered,” Voldemort ordered. He turned his hidden face toward Harry, and added, “It’s a pity she was unable to completely fulfil her role in the Chamber of Secrets, Harry. Everything would be so much simpler now. Oh – and Harry...? Crucio.” Harry refused to give Voldemort the satisfaction of a scream, and the curse was ended.

“Just a gentle reminder of who’s in charge,” Voldemort said calmly. “I grow weary of your efforts at control. You see, Harry Potter, I’m very interested in what lies beneath. I suspect that we’re more alike than you know –”

“We’re nothing alike, not in the least!” Harry shouted.

“Ah!” exclaimed Voldemort. “Now there was a crack in that reserve of yours. Your outburst at the Malfoy boy was particularly delicious – if no one had stepped in, I think that you just might have killed him.”

“I’m no killer,” Harry said.

“Of course you are,” Voldemort said soothingly. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’ll find it a liberating experience.”

“I’m not a killer, I tell you!” Harry insisted.

“You’ve already done it once today,” Voldemort told him. “Wasn’t it everything you hoped for?”

Harry’s mouth went dry. “You’re... you’re bluffing,” he stammered, “I... I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Travers was practically nothing, but he was someone – at least until you were through with him. Your precious little friend’s father seems to think that you did it with your bare hands...”

“What have you done to him?” Harry demanded, struggling at his bonds.

“Nothing, nothing at all,” Voldemort assured him. “It’s scarcely Legilimency with Muggles – all their thoughts and fears are right there on the surface, ripe for the taking. Come. We mustn’t keep anyone waiting. Mobilicorpus!” Harry lifted off the settee and drifted ahead of Voldemort, toward the dining room.

“Does she know anything, Mulciber?” Voldemort called out.

A Death Eater at the far end of the dining room answered, “She does, my Lord, but it has been locked in. She is unable to reveal anything.”

Hermione was bound tightly, and sitting in an armchair at the far end of the dining room table. She shook uncontrollably. Harry summoned every last bit of reserve inside himself in order to remain calm.

Voldemort said, “Sit,” and Harry was deposited into the armchair at the near end of the table.

“Leave her alone, you monsters!” Mr. Granger shrieked.

“Enough, you insufferable Muggle!” another Death Eater drawled, and slapped Mr. Granger hard across the face.

“If it isn’t Mr. Malfoy,” Harry sneered. “What an unpleasant surprise.”

Mr. Weasley, who was tied to a chair along the wall, croaked, “Hello, Lucius. I’m surprised you have a cauldron left to piss in after buying your way out of Azkaban.”

Malfoy began to walk slowly toward Mr. Weasley. “Weasley, I’d have you gutted and stuffed like a Christmas goose if I thought you merited the effort. As it stands, I think we’ll just toss you out with the rest of the rubbish. Can I have him, my Lord?”

“If it suits me,” Voldemort said imperiously. “Let us see about this locking-in. Open your mind to me, girl!”

Hermione screamed. It was the most horrifying sound that Harry had ever heard, and it tore through his soul. He felt as if the room had burst into flames. She slumped in her chair, and gasped for air between racking coughs.

“Dumbledore is not the virtuous soul you all think he is!” Voldemort sang out with glee. “Do any of you have any idea what he has done to this girl? Oh – Albus, my old, old friend! There may be hope for you yet!”

Voldemort reached out and stroked Hermione’s hair. She tried weakly to pull away, and failed. Harry shook madly against the ropes, but only managed to topple his chair. “Harry Potter, when I first heard that you fancied a Mudblood, I presumed that you were hopelessly underdemanding. Of course, after this afternoon... I better appreciated her charms. But now... Miss Granger, I am enthralled by your mind even as I revile your blood. You may yet be a formidable ally in the fulfilment of my plans.”

Her voice cracked, and she mustered enough energy to cry out, “I’ll die first, you bastard!”

Voldemort laughed. “The latter point is accurate, I admit. The former remains to be seen. Wormtail, Malfoy, I’m afraid that your petty grudges will have to wait for another day.” He strode purposefully toward Harry. “Now, then... to business. I have a proposition for you – a simple choice, one that will allow me to see what Harry Potter is truly made of. If you hold your place while Miss Granger is killed, then you and everyone else present may live to see another day. If you fail to hold your place, then I cannot be responsible for what will happen next.” He waved his wand, and both Harry and the armchair were righted. Harry heard a faint popping behind him, but his eyes were riveted on Hermione.

“Don’t move, Harry,” she moaned.

“They’ll kill us all anyway,” Mr. Weasley managed. “Do anything that you can – all of you.”

Harry felt his left hand drop free.

“Let us take Dumbledore’s handiwork to its natural conclusion,” Voldemort said. “Wormtail, satisfy your blood lust. Ask Miss Granger to reveal her secret. Keep asking... over... and over... and over... and over...”

Voldemort’s voice echoed through Harry’s head, and in his ears. Wormtail’s squeaky tenor joined it, bubbling through deep dark water.

“Reveal your secret! What do you know about Potter? Reveal your secret, girl!”

Hermione began screaming again. He counted heads in a vain effort to block out the awful sound. In addition to Voldemort, Wormtail and Malfoy, there were six other Death Eaters in the room, and an unknown number outside. The entire dinner party and Hestia Jones were all in the room, bound, and without wands.

“Reveal your secret, or die!”

Harry’s hair rippled in a searing draft. She’s ten feet away – just ten feet, he thought.

Wormtail forced Hermione off the chair and onto her knees. She shook, but maintained her balance. Her eyes were closed, and she was no longer screaming. She looked strong. It occurred to Harry that he wasn’t seeing strength – she was resolved to die, he knew. He felt his right hand drop free. The child who grew up in a cupboard was no more. The schoolboy who feared his Potions master and his foul classes had forever gone away. The person he had been that very morning was reduced to ashes drifting in a hot wind. He felt the rope binding his ankles fall to the floor. Voldemort had offered him a ‘greater good’ problem, and the decision was made. I don’t give a damn about the greater good, he thought. She’s not going to die today, and neither am I. Something inside him snapped, and he knew that he would never be exactly the same.

In the same instant, his hands were around Wormtail's throat. Voldemort took two steps backward, as though he were moving in thick mud. He could hear Voldemort's heart quicken; the rapid throbbing echoed in his ears. Harry picked up Wormtail by the scruff of the neck, and flung him the length of the table. He whirled, only to see Malfoy advance on Hermione. A blast of blue light rocketed across the room, and flung Malfoy backward. Voldemort pointed his wand, and Dobby was bounced off the wall. Tonks was already free, and she flung the table on its side to create a barrier in the middle of the room. Harry dashed headlong at the nearest Death Eater, and began swinging. He squeezed his eyes shut as he pounded away. There were bits of... something... flying around. This is for Sirius! Pound-pound-pound. He opened his eyes, and dove at the next Death Eater. That is for my father! Pound-pound-pound-CRASH! He ran to the next, and the next. It was as though they were petrified – unable to move away from him. That is for my mother! Pound-pound-thud-THUMP! This is for the ruddy prophecy! Pound-pound-pound-pound. This is for ruining my life! Pound-WHUMP! This is for hurting my friends! Pound-pound-pound. His hands felt warm and slick. This is for what you did to Hermione, you monsters! The wind roared in his ears. Everything was so terribly loud.

Suddenly, his scar burned. It feels good, doesn't it? This is what you were meant to do - it's who you are meant to be! Embrace it! And lest you forget... I'm watching you, Harry Potter... I'm always watching you... He lashed back with his mind, but Voldemort had already gone. POUND! POUND! POUND! CRASH!

His lungs seared as cool air poured into them. Sweat rained down his face. He dropped to his knees. The room was a haze of shapes and colours, distorted by a dark moist film on his glasses. His hands seemed to be bruised and wet.

No one was moving. It slowly occurred to him that some were still bound, and that no one else dared move. He looked slowly around the room. There was no sign of Voldemort, Wormtail or Malfoy. The head count was wrong, though. There were more people than before.

He walked past one Death Eater, sprawled against the flipped table and bent at an improbable angle. Another was embedded in the

dining room wall. Harry thought of the punching bag in the Dursley's cellar, and he felt bile rise in the back of his throat.

Hermione. She sat on the floor, dazed and leaning against her father. Harry approached, and her eyes widened. He approached closer, and she flinched. He stopped.

“Hermione...” His voice sounded terribly distant – he could almost feel it more than hear it.

She folded against her father, shaking in...

Fear, he thought. There's no mistaking it. She was terrified of him. He reached out toward her, and saw his hands clearly for the first time. They were stained with blood, nearly to the wrists. It was surely blood on his glasses as well, he knew. The bile rose again, and he dropped to his hands and knees and vomited on the floor.

He felt a pair of hands on his back. Thank Merlin, he thought, and he began to relax. He struggled to his knees, and discovered that it was in fact Ron who was helping him to his feet. Hermione pulled her father's arm around her and clung to it. She stared at him – she judged him, he was sure – and he suddenly wanted to die. He craved the release of the Killing Curse; he wanted to be the one embedded in the wall. He saw enough of the room to know that none of the other Death Eaters had made out any better. She's terrified of me, he thought, and she should be.

Ron walked Harry toward the doorway to the kitchen, past Lupin, Shackbolt, Dumbledore and a half dozen others he didn't know. Harry avoided eye contact with anyone. Ron led him to the sink. He turned the water as hot as he could make it, and began to scrub. A stream of red swirled clockwise around the drain. His skin blistered and then split as he scrubbed and scrubbed. Ron's hands clutched at Harry's arms, and pulled them away from the water. Harry looked up. Ron's mouth moved but said nothing, and it occurred to Harry that he was unable to hear. Ron stopped talking, then turned, and began talking to someone else.

Dobby stood on the kitchen island behind them. He put his fingers in Harry's ears, and there was gentle warmth. When he withdrew his hands, he looked at Harry sadly.

"Harry Potter wore the wrong socks today," he squeaked mournfully. He clambered down from the kitchen island, and disappeared into the dining room.

"I have to go," Harry said.

"We would all be dead," Ron told him. "All of us."

"I have to go," Harry repeated.

"I doubt you'll be going anywhere for quite some time, Mr. Potter," ventured an officious voice. Harry turned and nearly walked into the terribly flustered speaker: Cornelius Fudge.

Chapter Fifteen

FIFTEEN SECONDS

Amelia Bones shifted uncomfortably in the low-backed chair behind the Grangers' desk. "Sit, Arthur," she said.

"You look pinched. Shall I conjure a different chair for you?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Seating arrangements are the least of my concerns," sighed Madam Bones. "In other circumstances, we would dispense with the formalities. However –"

Both turned to face the door, distracted by insistent rapping. A frustrated voice called out, "Amelia, I demand to be present!"

Madam Bones waved her wand, and the door to the Grangers' study opened. Red-faced and frowning, Cornelius Fudge barged into the room. "I am the Minister for Magic, whether or not you find that convenient!" he bellowed. "If I wish to participate in an enquiry, then I shall participate!"

"Minister, may I remind you that I am appointed and serve at the pleasure of the Wizengamot," Madam Bones said coolly. "The separation between the Office of the Minister and the Department of Magical Law Enforcement was not made lightly..." After a pause calculated to make her opponent wither, she added, "...given the rampant abuses that followed the last conflict with Voldemort."

Fudge's ears tinged red. He sought an outlet for his anger, and lit into Mr. Weasley. "You would be in the middle of this – wouldn't you, Weasley? I believe it may be appropriate for you to join Dumbledore's other lackeys on suspension, pending a full enquiry into your professional conduct!"

Mr. Weasley's expression remained implacable. "It seems that two of the three parties present are presently engaged in professional conduct, at any rate," he said evenly.

Fudge jabbed a finger toward Mr. Weasley, but Madam Bones cut him off before he could speak. “Minister, we are questioning more than twenty witnesses. We have taken seven Death Eaters alive. There are injuries to address. We have more than thirty Obliviators canvassing the area –”

“Why do you think that I arrived here so quickly? We wouldn’t turn out such resources if a Hungarian Horntail landed atop Buckingham Palace!” Fudge thundered.

Madam Bones became positively icy. “My point, Minister, is that you are intruding in the middle of an active investigation. You have already accosted and potentially tainted two witnesses –”

“If you mean Potter and Weasley’s boy, they’re not witnesses! They’re the prime offender and his accomplice!” Fudge blustered. He turned to Mr. Weasley, and sneered, “Unauthorized underage magic, Weasley – and curses, no less. I look forward to snapping your boy’s wand in two. Lest you forget –”

“This discussion is at an end, Minister,” pronounced Madam Bones. “Leave or I shall have you removed.”

“You’d do well to remember that you have a conflict of interest in all of this, Amelia. I won’t be able to protect you if this goes awry; it’ll all lay at your feet,” Fudge warned. “I have friends – powerful friends amongst the Wizengamot. You’d best remember that as well.”

Mr. Weasley stood. “Tell me, Minister – would those be the friends who backed Umbridge last year and are now in disgrace?” he asked. “Would you share these friends in common with Lucius Malfoy? Lucius was here, by the way, in full Death Eater regalia. I wonder how that will play in the Daily Prophet ?”

Fudge gibbered, “You... impossible... lies, I tell you... Malfoy couldn’t have... slander! They’d never even consider... unreliable witnesses, all of you... keep in mind for whom you work, Weasley!”

“I was under the impression that I was no longer working for you, Minister,” Mr. Weasley said calmly.

“Suspension, Weasley – I was referring to a temporary suspension, of course... while we get the facts straight...” back-pedalled Fudge.

Mr. Weasley smiled. “Thank Merlin for the inheritance,” he said. “I believe that the time has come when I can be of greater service outside of government. Minister, it has for the most part been a pleasure.”

“You can’t...” Fudge gasped.

“I can,” Mr. Weasley said, with the air of a man lightened, “and I shan’t go quietly.”

“Much as I enjoy Ministry politics, I have witnesses to question,” Madam Bones frowned. “Minister, I shall ask you once more to leave. I shall not ask again.”

“I’ll be outside, then, checking on the progress of the Obliviators,” Fudge said imperiously. “I expect an update the very moment that your enquiry is concluded.” He shook his head as though children and fools surrounded him.

Madam Bones called out “Colloportus” before Fudge was completely through the door; the squelch was accompanied by the unmistakable sound of stumbling.

“Are you certain about this?” she asked Mr. Weasley quietly.

“Today’s events were... clarifying,” he answered. “There’s enough to be done, without kowtowing to that... that... sodding bumbler!”

Madam Bones smiled faintly. “My heart be still – you very nearly cursed!” she teased.

“Sorry,” he murmured. “It’s been a cursing sort of day.”

“I should say so,” Madam Bones said. “I have a number of people to interview and many, many questions about all of this before I meet with Harry. What are we going to do about the boy, Arthur? The situations he finds himself in...” She sat ramrod-straight in the office chair, and took out a Quick Quill. “Let’s begin, shall we?”

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Ron fumed at the two Aurors who led him into the Grangers’ study. “I swear – if you think you’re taking Harry to Azkaban, I’ll ... I’ll ... I don’t know what I’ll do, but you’ll never forget it – I promise you that!”

Madam Bones smiled. “I’ll be sure to take note that Harry has loyal friends. Sit down, Mister Weasley. No one has said anything about Azkaban, and no one will. I’m simply attempting to reconcile the different witness accounts.”

“My name is Ron, ma’am,” said Ron, looking around nervously.

“Of course it is,” Madam Bones said. “Please take a seat, Ron.”

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“It happened so fast,” Mrs. Weasley said. “I was in shock, really. One instant, Harry was sitting at the far end of the table. The next, he was standing at the near end, with his hands around Pettigrew’s throat.”

“You’re certain that it was Pettigrew, Molly?” asked Madam Bones.

“Deadly certain,” Mrs. Weasley answered firmly.

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“The whole thing took a while to unfold. Which interval are you looking for, ma’am?” Tonks asked.

Madam Bones clarified, “Beginning with Harry still seated, and ending when the last Death Eater fell.”

Tonks counted on her fingers, her lips moving wordlessly. “Fifteen seconds, at the outside,” she concluded.

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“No, ma’am, I know for a fact that he didn’t have a wand,” Ginny said meekly.

“How do you know that, precisely?” Madam Bones asked.

“Harry’s wand is hard to miss, even in a pile. I saw them take Harry’s wand from him, while he was still unconscious. One of them put all of our wands in that bag, the bag I saw the Aurors holding –”

“Do you know which Death Eater took the wands, Ginny?”

“I think V-Voldemort called him Mulciber,” Ginny said after a pause.

“So, you know that Harry didn’t have his own wand,” Madam Bones concluded. “How do you know that he didn’t have another wand?”

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“He used his fists, Amelia – I swear it,” Shacklebolt maintained.

“How much did you actually see, Kingsley?” Madam Bones asked. “You had a poor vantage point.”

“More than enough,” Shacklebolt insisted. “When I arrived, Pettigrew was torturing Miss Granger...”

Madam Bones’ eyes narrowed. “How do you know that it was Peter Pettigrew – you never met him, did you? I need you to be very certain about this. The Ministry’s official position remains that Pettigrew died a hero, whether or not we know better.”

“We did overlap in school – I was four years ahead of him – but I didn’t become truly familiar with his face until I was assigned to search for Sirius Black. I had a picture of the man on my office wall for two years,” Shacklebolt explained. “He looks older now, to be sure, and his hair has thinned, but... I know who I saw.”

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“I told everyone to resist,” Mr. Weasley said. “They were going to kill us all – there was little doubt of that.”

“Were you aware that Harry was no longer bound?” Madam Bones asked.

“I don’t believe he was free at that point,” Mr. Weasley recalled. “I saw Dobby – that’s Harry’s house-elf – a few moments later. Dobby also freed Tonks before... you know, before everything went to pieces.”

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“Dobby will answer your questions, as best as he is able,” Dobby said carefully.

“Thank you, Dobby. I’ve never known a free house-elf. You serve Harry of your own accord, then?” Madam Bones asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Dobby said proudly. “Harry Potter is the greatest person Dobby has ever known. He is kind, he is brave, and he made Dobby free...” Dobby sniffed loudly, his enormous eyes watering. “Dobby would do anything to protect Harry Potter.”

Madam Bones considered this carefully. “I see that you would, Dobby. Did Harry kill those Death Eaters, or did you kill them?” she asked.

Dobby said sadly, “Harry Potter killed the Death Eaters, as far as Dobby could see. Dobby was struck by a curse from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, after Dobby had struck his former master...”

Madam Bones' eyes widened slightly. "Are you referring to Lucius Malfoy?"

Dobby nodded. "That... person who was once my master moved toward Miss Granger. Dobby defended Miss Granger. Miss Granger is very important to Harry Potter."

Madam Bones looked at him curiously. "In what manner?"

"Miss Granger is Harry Potter's closest friend..." Dobby said. The house elf looked around the room carefully and nervously, as though he feared being overheard, and then whispered, "...and perhaps more." He seized a book from the Grangers' desk, and cracked himself in the head once. "Bad Dobby! Surely Dobby is not supposed to say that," he squeaked.

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"I was pretty woozy, ma'am," Fred said by way of qualification.

Madam Bones nodded. "I understand that, Fred. If you're not up to this..."

Fred sat up straighter. "I'd like to do this now. Anything that I can do for Harry, I'll do."

"What did you see?" she asked.

"I saw Harry Apparate the length of the table," he said. "I thought I was hallucinating. Besides, he went from sitting and facing one way, to standing and facing the other way. If I tried that, at best I'd end up on my arse... urgh – sorry, ma'am."

"I've heard worse," Madam Bones said. "What else did you see?"

"He picked up the first Death Eater, the one who was killing Hermione, and tossed him down the table," explained Fred. "That's when I was sure that I was hallucinating. I mean, Harry mustn't be ten stone soaking wet; how could he throw a grown wizard like that?"

Madam Bones withdrew a photograph from a file folder. "Is this the man that you saw?"

Fred looked closely at the photograph. "If the nasty bugger would just hold still..." Fred flicked the back of the photo with his middle finger, and the man in the picture stopped and scowled at him. "He looked older than this, but I think this is a picture of him."

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"Harry couldn't have Apparated," Bill Weasley said firmly.

"Everyone says he moved instantly from one end of the table to the other," Madam Bones observed.

"I understand that," said Bill. "I saw the same phenomenon. What I'm telling you is that it couldn't have been Apparation."

"You're terribly insistent," Madam Bones said. "Why are you so certain?"

Bill explained, "You must have heard about the splinching in the yard. Dumbledore, Shacklebolt and I laboured over the anti-Apparation wards on this property. There is no chance that Harry Apparated... by that look, I assume that you already know something."

Madam Bones held up a parchment. "From Mafalda Hopkirk," she told him. "Harry doesn't have an Apparation license; if he had Apparated, the Improper Use Office would have picked it up. You're right – he didn't Apparate."

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Madam Bones carefully took in Hermione's face – the red-rimmed eyes set in hollows, the obvious fatigue. Mrs. Granger hovered, holding her daughter's hand. Mr. Granger stood near the door, hands in fists at his sides.

“Mr. Granger, I assure you that this is not an adversarial process,” Madam Bones offered.

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” he growled. “That madman out there calling himself the Minister for Magic threatened me. He said that Cordelia and I should have our memories erased!”

“Minister Fudge has no authority whatever in these matters; I do, and no one will be erasing anything,” Madam Bones assured him.

“I want you people out of our house,” Mr. Granger snarled.

“Sir, I assure you that we will leave just as soon as I have reconciled today’s events with the evidence,” Madam Bones said calmly. “We are also attempting to repair the damage done to your home...”

Mr. Granger scowled, but said nothing. Mrs. Granger sighed, “It’s not that we’re ungrateful for the repair efforts. The events today are crystal clear in our minds. We just want to set about attending to our daughter’s welfare. She’s been hurt terribly, and no one seems to care about that.”

Madam Bones ambled from behind the desk, and knelt down in front of Hermione. The obviously motherly gesture caused Mrs. Granger to release her grip on Hermione slightly. She took Hermione’s free hand, and said, “I want to start by telling you how very sorry I am. There is absolutely no doubt that Voldemort forced himself into your mind. That is a very serious offence – virtually Unforgivable, in fact.”

“It wasn’t the first time,” Hermione whispered without looking up.

Madam Bones raised an eyebrow. “Pardon?”

“He entered a dream,” whispered Hermione.

“Would you tell me about that?” Madam Bones asked.

Hermione looked to her mother and father, and then to Madam Bones, and shook her head slowly from side to side.

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“You were upstairs when the attack began?” asked Madam Bones.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ron. “Harry decided to defend the stairs, and I went with him.”

Madam Bones wrinkled her nose. “What did your mother have to say about that?”

“She was none too pleased, I can tell you,” Ron told her. “We checked the front room, at the base of the stairs, and returned up the stairs just before the Death Eaters.”

Madam Bones said, “That is consistent with the physical evidence. What led the two of you back up the stairs, then?”

Ron shrugged. “The Death Eaters drew our force into the yard. Our King – er, I mean Harry – was left exposed. I figured they were staging a minority attack, and I was right.”

“You’re a chess player?” Madam Bones asked.

“Yes, ma’am. It’s too bad that I was playing in two dimensions,” Ron explained.

“I’m sorry?”

“I was playing in two dimensions,” repeated Ron. “I never counted on them coming through the ceiling.”

Madam Bones smiled faintly. “I wouldn’t fret – that was a good observation on your part, Ron. Now then... your mother laid out the scene in the safe room. Tell me, did you do anything to assist Harry in opening the door?”

“No, ma’am.” Ron looked at her questioningly.

“What you’re saying is that Harry blew a heavily warded door to pieces by casting a punching spell,” Madam Bones confirmed. “Where did you learn a piercing curse, by the way?”

Ron lowered his eyes. “Erm... Harry cast that one on a Death Eater in the bedroom.”

“Ah, yes, that would be... Travers – the one that he tossed bodily through a warded window.” Madam Bones jotted notes on parchment. “After that, Harry took off on that rather interesting motorbike?”

Ron gritted his teeth at the mention. “Yes, ma’am,” he acknowledged.

“Thank Merlin it’s not a Muggle artefact,” she said. “We’re left with one less thing to be addressed.”

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“So you were pinned down in the tree, then,” Madam Bones observed.

“Yes, ma’am,” Tonks admitted nervously.

“A questionable strategy, Tonks. You couldn’t Apparate from the location, and you had no broom,” Madam Bones said. “How many Death Eaters were you able to take from there?”

“I took down two, and kept three more distracted from Arthur and Bill Weasley for a time,” offered Tonks.

“At this point, Harry comes in?” asked Madam Bones.

Tonks talked with her hands. “He brings that motorbike swooping over the top of the house, see? Now, this is the second time he does that. The first time, he dropped two Death Eaters off the roof and laid down cover for the Weasleys and me. By this time, I’ m the last one standing in the yard. Harry shouts ‘Percutio!’ –”

Tonks' recovered wand was concealed in her sleeve. The resulting spell pierced a neat hole through a lampshade.

Madam Bones flinched, and instantly cast a defensive shield. "Tonks, you're a menace," she growled.

Tonks grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, ma'am," she murmured, and instinctively placed her hands behind her back.

"Continue," ordered Madam Bones as she repaired the lampshade.

"Yes, ma'am. Harry started casting that... particular spell, over and over," Tonks explained. "Blood and bits were everywhere. I don't think he ever saw the Death Eater that dropped him off the motorbike. After that, they were on me in a few seconds – it seemed as though they were everywhere."

"Where would Harry have picked up such a nasty curse?" Madam Bones asked. "It's not as if he would learn that at Hogwarts."

"He has a scary library at his house, for one," Tonks answered. "Kingsley's been training him up, but they just started a few days ago."

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"How long were you observing the events?" Madam Bones asked.

Shacklebolt didn't hesitate. "No more than forty seconds, from the time I had a sightline until the time that Potter completed his defence _"

"You keep referring to it as a defence, rather than an attack," Madam Bones observed.

"I call it what it was," Shacklebolt said. "I had a wand, and I still spent better than twenty-five seconds simply evaluating the room. From a search-and-rescue perspective, it was a nightmare. You had Voldemort and eight Death Eaters, with eleven hostages, in a

constrained space with two doors, three windows and ample furniture for cover. I figured that it would require three Aurors to take the room, and I estimated four or five friendly casualties. I assumed that Miss Granger was a certain casualty. Harry had no wand that I could see, and had a house-elf for help. What he did, he did in no more than fifteen seconds. It may have been only ten, from the time he threw Pettigrew until the end of it.”

“You’re impressed,” Madam Bones noted.

“I saw him jump from point to point twice today, once through his own defensive spell and once inside a warded house. What he’s doing isn’t Apparation – I don’t know what it is. Most of his spells and charms are excessively powerful; thankfully, it seems that no one has ever told him that. He performed some truly exceptional wandless magic three days ago. And in that dining room... I tell you, he took that room like an angry Hit Wizard,” Shacklebolt said. “I don’t know whether to be impressed or terrified.”

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“Did you find it frightening?” asked Madam Bones.

“I’ve seen my share of horrors, Madam Bones,” Bill said. “Spend a few days opening cursed tombs, and you’ll understand. Frankly, watching them use Dumbledore’s curse to torture Hermione was more frightening than anything Harry did.”

Madam Bones frowned. “I understand your concern, but... are you positive about the nature of that spell? I shan’t be making unfounded accusations.”

Bill sighed. “I’ve gone over it, and over it again, ma’am. It’s a Latinized derivative of the Egyptian servant-binding curse. The old servant binds are still classified as Unforgivable by the Egyptian Directorate.”

“Why is it a derivative? How was it materially changed from the original curse?” Madam Bones asked.

“In this case, I think it was supposed to limit the binding to a specific thought or secret,” Bill explained. “If he’d just cast the curse, perhaps it might not have turned out badly. Harry described an additional runic component, I’m afraid, that was applied to both he and Hermione.”

“Albus bound her to Harry?” thundered Madam Bones.

“The intention was to bind Harry’s secret within her, I imagine, but I believe that he missed the mark,” grumbled Bill.

“You don’t think that the runes somehow looped the curse, do you? Merlin... it could be unbreakable,” Madam Bones speculated.

“There is no such thing as an unbreakable curse,” Bill said flatly. “I have a different concern. The purpose of runic elements or the use of glyphs in ancient Egyptian curses is chiefly punitive. In the servant-binding curse, the principle is to make each violation of the bind more severe. If this curse isn’t lifted from her very soon, I’m concerned that there might be permanent effects. Depending upon the particular runic elements, those effects could range from memory loss to a permanent darkening of her aspect.”

“This is inexcusable,” fumed Madam Bones. “Albus will explain himself.”

“He’ll say that Harry’s protection must be assured at any cost,” Bill offered.

Madam Bones frowned. “Then he will be wrong”.

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“He’s in shock, to be certain,” Lupin said.

“That would be reasonable,” Madam Bones determined. “He can be in shock as long as he wishes, provided that he represents no harm to himself or others. This brings me back to my question, Mr. Lupin.”

“I don’t believe that he’s suicidal,” Lupin allowed. “I’m not an expert, of course.”

“You know I must ask this – is he a danger to others?” asked Madam Bones.

Lupin hesitated slightly. “Again, I don’t believe that he is. When I arrived, he was just standing there in a daze. I saw only the aftermath, however. It’s hard for me to imagine a circumstance that would take Harry to that place, other than the threat of imminent death.”

Madam Bones nodded. “I’ve assumed from the start that it was self-defence.”

Lupin said, “Defence – not self-defence. Harry would be much more inclined to anger in the face of imminent threat to others than to himself.”

“Do you believe that he requires more supervision – a guardian, perhaps?” asked Madam Bones.

“I think he’s been under terrible strain for the last two months,” Lupin answered. “He needs a light at the end of the tunnel. He needs friends, not guardians.”

“On this, we agree,” Madam Bones said. “I’d welcome your ideas about how to go forward.”

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“What – you think Harry wants to off himself? You must be joking,” said Ron.

Madam Bones said, “My concerns are serious. If there is a chance that he will harm himself, then I am required to intervene.”

“Am I worried about him? Of course I am. He’s really broken up about the whole thing. Am I going to hide the knives? No,” Ron said emphatically.

“That’s good to hear –” Madam Bones began.

“I’m much more worried about Hermione,” Ron insisted.

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Hermione relaxed slightly, once her parents left the room at her insistence.

“What is it that you wanted to tell me, Hermione?” Madam Bones asked. Hermione proceeded to explain the shared dream, in emotionless and nearly clinical terms.

Madam Bones carefully elicited the essentials, and the identities of all the dream’s participants. “Have you discussed this with Harry?” she asked.

“No,” Hermione sniffed. “I mean, he knows... but I can’t.”

“May I ask why? He didn’t... violate you in some way, did he?”

Hermione’s eyes widened. She snapped bitterly, “No! Harry would never do that! You know who violated whom!” She paused and struggled, and then added, “I just wanted... ma’am, have you ever done anything in a dream that you wouldn’t necessarily do in real life?”

Madam Bones nodded knowingly. “Doesn’t that make it even more important that you discuss the experience with him?”

“I can’t,” Hermione insisted, her eyes downcast.

“Of course you can,” Madam Bones offered.

“You didn’t see what he did to those people... it was like... like he became someone else. Voldemort said... he said that would happen,” she said, wavering between anger and sadness and barely skirting the edge of crying. “I don’t know how Harry could... he just kept

going... I wanted them to... I wanted them to hurt, I wanted to... to hurt them..."

"You wanted to kill them, I imagine," said Madam Bones. "I would have, in your place."

"Maybe... maybe I did want that, but I never... there was... there was so much blood... blood everywhere... it was all over him and he was screaming..." Hermione stopped, and Madam Bones waited patiently.

"You need to talk to someone. Through my department, we have... services that are made available to Aurors after particularly grisly episodes. It would be no bother to extend these services to you," Madam Bones gently offered. "It is all very discreet. I clearly understand the stigma –"

Hermione cut her off. "Thank you for the offer," she said flatly.

Madam Bones asked, "Is there anything else about today's events that you feel I should know, before I speak to Harry?"

"No," Hermione mouthed, as her resolve faded and tears began to fall.

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"What are we going to do about this, Amelia?" Dumbledore asked.

"We will not be doing anything," Madam Bones said. "This is out of your hands. You could consider atonement for what you have done to Miss Granger."

Dumbledore said evenly, "She accepted her role in protecting Harry."

"You abdicated your role in protecting her," accused Madam Bones. "As a Hogwarts Governor, I shall remind you that you bear an equal responsibility for all the students in your care."

“I misjudged the safeguard,” Dumbledore admitted, “but I do not believe that young Mr. Weasley has accurately assessed the problem.”

Madam Bones eyed him warily. “Explain yourself, Albus. I haven’t the time for riddles and incomplete truths.”

“I instructed Hermione to clear her mind of all thoughts save the secret to be guarded, but I fear that I may have overestimated her ability to comply,” Dumbledore explained. “I fear that she labours under multiple safeguards, of which she is unaware.”

“Bill Weasley wants the curse broken, and I agree wholeheartedly,” Madam Bones said.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. “That may be a complicated request, if I prove correct in my assessment.”

Madam Bones set her jaw. “You misunderstand me, Albus. It is not a request. Shall I tell Fudge that his nemesis is now dabbling in foreign Unforgivables?”

Dumbledore’s eyes flickered for a moment, but his face betrayed nothing. “I hardly think that you will choose any course of action that strengthens the Minister’s position. I do wish he would remember from time to time that he will eventually be going to war with Voldemort, and not me.”

Madam Bones stood and stretched. “It’s time that I speak to Harry.”

“I agree,” Dumbledore said, remaining in the armchair that he had conjured. “He needs to be put at ease.”

“I doubt that he will find ease today, or any time soon,” Madam Bones pointed out. “Surely you realise what will happen when word of these events reaches the rest of the Governors? I don’t need abilities in Divination to foresee another very lengthy meeting.”

Dumbledore sighed. “I have very little left with which to bargain, on that account. Where will you stand?”

“I don’t believe for a moment that he would intentionally harm anyone, not without serious provocation,” said Madam Bones. “Still... Albus, I’m not a fool – though lately you insist upon treating me as one. It’s not as though I lack an understanding of what he means to us all. Do you honestly think that I want to toss Harry to the wolves? I’ll stand by him through all of it. Even if he hadn’t been treated so shabbily last year, family honour would demand nothing less. However, I expect to be in the minority when the Governors convene – and we will surely convene.”

Dumbledore sighed heavily, and requested of her, “Will you assist me in the exploration of contingencies, on his behalf?”

Madam Bones nodded in acknowledgement, and then added, “On your way out, would you please send him in and ask Mr. Lupin to come as well?”

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow, hesitated, and then stood. With a flick and a swish, the armchair disappeared and Dumbledore ambled to the door of the study.

He turned. “Amelia, I do believe that I should at the very least...”

She scowled at him. “Apologise to Miss Granger – and her parents – and make preparations to remove that curse? Excellent ideas, all.”

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It had been made clear to Harry that he was not permitted to leave. Madam Bones, who had arrived shortly after Fudge and taken command of the scene, was in possession of Harry’s wand. From time to time, he spied an Auror checking on him. For the most part, everyone gave him a wide berth.

He paced out in the yard for a time, walking from the porch to the far wall and back again. The furniture on the porch had long since been repaired; Ministry personnel had moved on to the roof. Harry sat in

the grass and watched them work, framed against the evening sun; one shingle after another popped into the proper place. He spotted Hermione peering at him from her bedroom window, drawn and almost ghostly, and then she was gone. Madam Bones was – interviewing? interrogating? – everyone, one at a time, and it seemed to take forever.

“Excuse me, Mr. Potter?” came a voice from behind him. It was one of the investigators from the Ministry.

Harry stood. “Yes, sir?”

The investigator was nervous and almost deferential, which puzzled Harry. “Well, you see... it’s just that... there’s a question about your motorbike. It isn’t...?”

Harry didn’t follow. “I don’t understand. It isn’t what, exactly?”

The investigator wrung his hands. “A Muggle artefact such as that could complicate matters... surely you must be aware...”

Harry nodded, and led the investigator to the fallen Bonneville. Three of the investigator’s colleagues were huddled around. Harry heard one mutter, “The scratch-proofing alone would be a Class One offence.”

“If you’ll pardon me,” Harry said, as he righted the bike and grasped the handlebars. A moment later, the Ministry investigators goggled at the dual sawhorses.

“It’s a broom, more or less,” Harry explained. “Devlin Whitehorn made it himself. I’m certain he could answer any questions that you might have.”

“No, no... erm... we wouldn’t want to bother Mr. Whitehorn, I’m sure,” the first investigator assured him. “Um... thank you for clearing that up. Terribly sorry ... no intention of making any accusations, of course...” His colleagues joined in a chorus of ‘Oh, no’, ‘absolutely not’ and other denials.

Harry frowned. "Is there anything else?" he asked, with an edge to his voice.

"Nothing else, Mr. Potter," one investigator blurted out; he was matched by crescendos of 'Not a thing' and 'We're finished here' that were capped by a brassy fanfare of 'You can go now'.

Even they're frightened of me, Harry thought. As he walked away from the Bonneville and trod over the roots of the tree that Tonks had climbed, he looked down. The grass was crushed down where the three Death Eaters had fallen, and tinted red in rolling swaths like a macabre watercolour. Harry averted his eyes. They should be frightened, he thought.

A young wizard in a fashionable cloak raced from the side yard toward the porch. "Minister! Minister! I apologize for being tardy. The meeting on importation tariffs ran very long. I'm prepared to take notes, sir." Harry turned, and felt his blood boil at the very sight of Percy Weasley. He hadn't noticed that Fudge was sitting at one of the high-backed benches on the porch.

"That won't be necessary. Madam Bones has everything in hand," Fudge spat.

"Madam Bones... but, sir! If Potter's involved, shouldn't you be leading the enquiry?" Percy asked brightly.

"Shut up, Weasley," Fudge said. "Now, what position did the Turks take on a secondary fee schedule...?"

There was no way into the house without passing within view of the benches. Oh, well – didn't want to go inside, anyway, Harry thought.

Ron walked out of the house onto the porch, in hushed conversation with Bill. Bill looked up at the benches. From Harry's vantage, he couldn't see Percy – but Bill clearly could.

“Why, look who’s here,” Bill snarled. “Come to gloat, have you? Hoping to shed a few crocodile tears over a dead family member, were you? Sorry to disappoint.”

Percy jumped to his feet. “Maybe you people will finally come to reason. Everything I’ve maintained about Potter has borne out, hasn’t it? What has he got himself into this time?”

Ron started to rush Percy, but was held back by Bill. “He saved us all from Voldemort, you arse!” Ron shouted. “Of course, you weren’t with us. You’re too busy with your important friends and your important job to have a family anymore!”

Fudge chose that moment to come into view. “Good evening, gentlemen,” he oozed. “Is there a problem here?”

Bill said curtly, “Good evening, Minister. This is a family affair, not Ministry business.”

“It looked to me as though my assistant was about to be assaulted,” Fudge observed. “That would make it my business, I believe.”

Fred came out of the house. “I thought I heard a pretentious git out here. It’s positively cracking to see you, Percy.” Percy nodded stiffly in recognition.

“Perhaps you would excuse us, Minister?” Bill said evenly. “It’s been quite some time since we’ve had occasion to speak to our brother.”

Fudge crossed his arms. “Perhaps my assistant and I should retire inside the house.”

Fred’s eyes narrowed. “Which brother haven’t we spoken to recently, Bill? I only see you and Ron... ah, you must mean Harry. Oy, Harry!” Fred waved at Harry, and Harry wished that he weren’t standing in the open.

Percy snapped, “Always the comedian, Fred. I see none of you have learned a thing.”

Bill advanced on Percy quickly enough to startle Fudge. "You've taught us quite a lot, Percy. Where were you when Dad lay dying at St. Mungo's last winter? It's a miracle that he survived – and it was largely thanks to Harry, by the way. What about when Ron was injured at the Ministry? No sign of you – not even an owl post, for Merlin's sake! Fred has a point. Harry's become more of a brother to us than you."

Fudge raised an eyebrow. "You never visited your father in hospital? Or your brother?"

Percy showed hints of fear. "But, Minister! You said..."

Fudge looked sternly at Percy. "I said that your family was exercising poor judgment in allying themselves with Potter, and that you should distance yourself from their choice. I stand by that advice. I never told you to abandon your duties as a son and a brother, Weasley. Bad form... bad form!"

Percy begged, "Minister... please..."

Fudge turned to Bill. "I believe you're correct, gentlemen: This is a family matter. If you'll excuse me?" With that, Fudge quickly strode into the house and closed the French door.

Bill's wand was out before the catch on the French door clicked. "Sit!" he ordered. The force in his voice was such that Harry took a seat on the grass, almost as quickly as Percy retreated to the bench.

Bill began to deliver what could only be described as an in-person Howler. "You arrogant twit! It's practically a matter of luck that you have any family left to insult... except for Charlie, of course, but even you're smart enough to know that he'd cheerfully feed you to the dragons! The Aurors were here almost an hour ago. If you were any kind of brother, you would have been here with them! But no – where's dear Percy? Sitting in a trade mission meeting, or some such rot! I'm sure your only regret was that you nearly lost the opportunity to kiss up to your boss! What kind of ghoulish have you become? You

come here not to see how your mother or father or brothers or sister fared –

“Sister?” Percy asked quietly.

“Yes – sister. You have one, in case you didn’t remember. Her name is Ginny, and she was a few seconds from being killed along with the rest of us! Fred’s the family standard bearer – he almost managed to get himself killed twice today. After they took the Burrow, he came here, and –”

“Took the Burrow?” Percy asked in disbelief.

Bill looked at Fred. “Do you think that he has difficulty hearing me?”

Fred shrugged. “Maybe he’s been in government too long – I’m sure that’s what Dad would say.”

“Look at what you gain by association with Potter,” Percy retorted. “Your lives are in danger, and now you’ve lost the few possessions that the family had.”

“You mean you haven’t heard?” Fred asked.

Percy cocked his head to one side. “Heard what?”

“About the inheritance,” Fred answered.

When Percy remained blank, Bill explained smugly, “We were each left twenty thousand Galleons.”

Percy’s eyes lit, and Fred added, “Not you, you thick prat. Sirius did leave you something in his will -”

“Sirius Black?” Percy gasped.

“No, I meant Sirius Sappington... of course it was Sirius Black,” Bill snapped. “I’ll have to send you the rubber Galleon, but I’d be pleased to administer the kick in the arse.”

Percy sank, and Bill glowered, “Greedy... self-serving... and cowardly. The Sorting Hat did a number on you, didn’t it? If it weren’t for the hair and the freckles, I’d believe that you were accidentally switched at birth. I’m sure you’re right at home with Fudge and his friends. Lucius Malfoy was here along with his boss, by the way – complete with mask and Dark Mark.”

Percy babbled, “Wha... but Mr. Malfoy was... it couldn’t have been...”

The French door opened, and one of the Aurors leaned out. “Bill Weasley? Madam Bones will see you now.”

Bill scowled. “Pity – I was so looking forward to personally demonstrating some interesting things that I picked up from a Salish shaman. Keep a wide berth, Percy; pray that you don’t see me in passing.” He stomped into the house.

Percy turned to Fred. “Look... I –”

Fred cut him off. “Stow it. You had your chances to mend things. When you weren’t there for Ron in June... that was the last straw for me. We’re through.”

“Ron?” Percy ventured.

“Has anyone told you what happened to me in the Department of Mysteries, Percy?” Ron asked.

Percy stammered, “Well... I know you were injured, of course... that there was an attack... it appeared that, erm... uh, You-Know-Who was present, perhaps... and... uh... Ginny was there... not badly hurt, thank Merlin...”

“I was attacked by brains,” Ron said. “They’re called cognivores. They feed on your thoughts, and they give you back visions of death – my death, everybody’s death.” His voice changed to sound more like Trelawney’s eerie trill. “All I must do is touch, and it is revealed,” he warbled.

Everybody's death? Harry wondered. He never said that!

Fred searched Ron's face, saw a kernel of truth, and said, "Bloody hell... is that what's been eating at you? I didn't... Ron, I'm so sorry."

Percy drew himself up. "I know fiction when I hear it," he insisted.

In his misty voice, Ron continued, "All I must do is touch, Percy. Do not resist!"

Percy twitched, and stepped backward. "That's quite enough, Ron."

"I don't think he's playing," Fred said. "You don't know what he's been like. He's been to St. Mungo's, and they couldn't help."

Percy's eyes widened. "Stay away from me," he insisted.

"Do not resist," Ron whispered. He lashed out and grabbed Percy's arm. He twitched, and his eyes rolled back. He released Percy's arm as though shocked, and dropped to the porch.

"What? What was it? What did you see?" Percy demanded, his voice quavering.

Ron said in a chilling monotone, "She will betray you to him. She will betray you, Percy, and that will be the end of it."

Percy squeaked, "Excuse me... I have to... I'm sure that the Minister... excuse me..." He dashed to the door and scurried into the house.

Ron lay there quietly. Harry jumped up from the grass, and ran to Ron's side. His eyes were closed. Fred hovered over them both.

"Is he gone yet?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry said, "Sure, he's gone..."

Fred cut in, "Who's 'she' and who's 'he'? And what's 'the end of it'?"

Ron opened his eyes, and smiled broadly. "How should I know? I hope he has nightmares for a month, the wanker!"

Fred burst into hysterics, rolling on the porch. "Ooooh... unbelievable... that's classic!" he moaned.

Harry whispered to Ron, "Did you really see other people's deaths?"

Ron shook his head, and whispered in return, "Only mine. I just couldn't resist – he deserved that." Harry smiled a little, despite himself – he had to admit that it was a spanking good and well-deserved prank.

Ron sat up, and clapped Harry on the shoulder. "There's a smile," he said. "Happy to see it, mate."

Fred ruffled Ron's hair. "I wish my brother George were here," he laughed. "I'll be telling this one for years!"

The more that Ron and Fred carried on, the more that Harry's unease grew. Ron was behaving like himself for the first time all summer, precisely because he'd acknowledged what the cognivores had done to him. It seemed as though he had warmed to the idea of dying; he wore his old sense of humour like an overcoat atop something newer and darker. Harry didn't like that thought in the slightest, and felt a strong impulse to escape.

Harry awkwardly excused himself, and returned to pacing in the yard. After a time, he perched atop the wall at the rear of the yard and watched the shadows lengthen. Others came and went from the porch – Tonks, Hestia Jones, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. He saw Dumbledore once. Aurors, Obliviators and investigators continued to swarm over the house and surrounding area. The world had apparently reached an agreement with Harry, a mutual pact – you ignore me, I ignore you. No one on the porch acknowledged Harry, and he chose to sit quietly. There was movement in Hermione's window, and then nothing.

A solitary figure crossed the yard, lit here and there by waning orange light. Harry couldn't tell that it was Lupin until the figure was almost upon him.

"Would you tolerate some company?" Lupin asked.

Harry inclined his head indifferently. Lupin took that as affirmation, and clambered up to sit next to Harry atop the wall.

"The house looks as if nothing happened," Lupin said. "We know better, of course."

"What did you see?" Harry asked quietly.

"Blood, sadness, fear, guilt... all the sorts of things one sees in times like these," Lupin gently replied.

"Did you see what... what I...?" Harry asked.

Lupin set his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Only the aftermath," he answered.

"Good," whispered Harry.

A dozen or so Aurors remained – Harry assumed that they were probably protection against a repeat visit. He watched three of them pacing the walk just beyond the wall, menacingly eyeing each passing auto and pedestrian. "How many people had their memories modified today, do you suppose?" he asked.

Lupin sighed. "Scores, I should imagine. It was quite a display."

"I wonder if it's worth it, all the secrecy – all of this," Harry mused.

Lupin said, "You know perfectly well what would happen if we were found out. The Muggles would try to exterminate us. Those of us so inclined would retaliate. In the end, only the very worst of both our kinds would survive. It would make their Second World War look like a parlour game... and Voldemort would win. There might not be

anything left worth winning, depending upon your point of view – but he would win.”

“Perhaps that’s his plan,” Harry speculated.

Lupin shuddered. “Be sure to practice Occlumency, Harry. That’s not an idea that I care to share with him.”

Harry asked the question that he didn’t want to ask. “What’s happening in there?”

“Amelia Bones was with Hermione when I came outside, for the second time at least,” Lupin told him. “I’ll give her credit – her reputation for thoroughness is well earned. She has a reputation as a fair jurist and a brilliant mind. I also have it on reliable authority that she tacitly supported Umbridge’s anti-werewolf initiatives. I’m not exactly looking forward to this: I expect she’ll spend her time castigating me for my involvement in your life, or some such thing.”

“How much longer, do you think?” Harry asked.

“I believe she’s talked to everyone save me and Dumbledore,” Lupin answered.

They sat silently. Lupin shifted as if to speak several times, and then said nothing.

Two Aurors crossed the lawn. “Mr. Lupin, Madam Bones requests your presence,” one called out.

Lupin slid off the wall. He stopped, and faced Harry. “Give yourself time,” he said. “We’ll talk again later.”

After what seemed like a suitable delay, Harry crossed the yard to the empty porch and sat on one of the high-backed benches. It felt like the right place to wait his turn.

“May we join you?” Mrs. Weasley gazed down at him. Ron was with her. The look on her face was painfully kind, Harry thought. He

decided against turning them away, and gestured toward the other bench.

Mrs. Weasley took the opposite bench, but Ron sat beside him. She said, "If you're worried about lasting consequences from this afternoon, Harry, you can set aside your worries. Amelia was clear on that point. If it weren't for Fudge, I'd suspect that the Order of Merlin was a possibility."

"I wouldn't accept it," Harry said flatly.

"I wouldn't take anything from him either," Ron barked. "Fudge treated you and me like criminals – he as much as called you a lunatic."

Harry said, "I wouldn't accept it from anyone. I just want to forget it, all of it... but I can't... it's right there..." He bit down hard on his lower lip, unwilling to say more.

Mrs. Weasley reached across the table to take Harry's hand. "Harry, at some point you have to let this out. Not just this afternoon, dear, but the rest as well. It's eating a hole right through you."

"I let it all out today. You saw the result," Harry said coldly.

"Yes, I did," Mrs. Weasley acknowledged. "They would have killed us without a second thought. You saved ten lives. Three of the boys, and Ginny... he would have killed them... and Arthur... just like the b-boggart and my d-dreams..."

Ron paled. "A boggart... I remember that you were going to have Moody check for a boggart, last summer at Grimmauld Place..." Mrs. Weasley stiffened, and shot Ron a sharp glare that clearly stated his place.

When she regained her composure, she spoke slowly and carefully. "When you... did what you did, the only thing I remember thinking was that I was going to lose a son. Shame on me for not treating you that way, particularly this summer. Sirius was right – shame on us."

Harry struggled to respond. A small part of him still bridled at her interest in matching him with Ginny – he hoped that was in the past now – but she was still the closest thing to a mum that Harry had ever known. “You’ve treated me as a part of your family,” Harry said at last. “There’s a stack of handmade Christmas jumpers to prove it.”

Mrs. Weasley smiled. “You kept your jumpers,” she said wistfully. “They weren’t much, but they were what we could give.”

“They were enough,” Harry said. He looked about impatiently.

“You’ve nothing to fret about with this enquiry, Harry,” Mrs. Weasley insisted.

Harry began, “I just want it to be finished. I want to go...” He stopped the instant that he looked at Ron, and remembered that the Burrow had been sacked. “Goodness! I should have asked Dobby to make up the guest rooms – what have I been thinking? Surely you all need a place to stay –”

Mrs. Weasley gently rested her hand on Harry’s arm. “We’ve been looking into that already. I’ve spoken to Remus and briefly to Cordelia. Arthur, Ginny and I will stay here tonight; I just can’t leave the Grangers without help. Remus has already arranged rooms for Bill, Fred and Ron. I believe that Dobby’s already returned to Grimmauld Place.”

“You can make good on that drink you promised me,” Ron whispered with a smirk.

Lupin returned to the porch. Harry looked at him expectantly. Ron moved to sit beside his mother, and Lupin settled onto the bench in his place.

“The matter seems largely settled,” Lupin told him. “There are some lingering concerns about you and your welfare, but your legal status renders them moot.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked.

Lupin hesitated. “Harry... Madam Bones seems concerned as to whether you might do anything rash. It hasn’t gone without notice that you’re a bit withdrawn – not that you haven’t every right to be, under the circumstances –”

“Withdrawn? Everyone’s been steering clear of me! Even the bloody Aurors are skittish!” Harry boomed.

Lupin frowned. “You’ve been known to hold yourself to an unattainable standard now and again. Some concern has been expressed that you might do yourself harm.”

Harry gaped at him. “That’s rot, and you know it,” he scoffed.

“I do know it, and I told Madam Bones as much,” Lupin said. “I told her that you need a light at the end of the tunnel, and certainly not guardians and Ministry personnel prowling every minute of the day.”

Harry carefully regarded him. “You said that?”

“I did,” Lupin answered.

“Who expressed the concern, then? Was it Dumbledore?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” replied Lupin. “What would cause you to think that?”

“He wouldn’t want his weapon damaged, now would he?” Harry fumed.

Mrs. Weasley asked, “Isn’t that a bit harsh, Harry? Dumbledore has never demonstrated anything but care toward you.”

Harry fought the urge to shout, and won. “I question that this summer,” he said, carefully enunciating each word. Mrs. Weasley fidgeted.

“He’s not at all pleased about your... mass disclosure,” Lupin informed him.

Harry grumbled, “Heard about that, did you? I’m glad that it’s out.”

“It’s out, all right,” Lupin agreed. “There’s a decent chance that Voldemort now knows, I imagine.”

“Good,” Harry said flatly. “He’ll focus on me, then.”

Lupin shook his head in frustration. “He’ll focus on whatever is required to achieve his objectives, whatever that may be. That is the only certainty, Harry. You can’t direct his focus.”

Harry immediately thought of one way that he might, but remained silent.

Ron motioned to Harry with a subtle roll of his eyes, and Harry understood. It was the sort of gesture that only close friends share. Harry stood. “Excuse me,” he said, and stalked off into the yard. Ron followed shortly afterward.

“Mum means well,” Ron said.

“I know,” sighed Harry.

Ron stammered, “Madam Bones, she asked me whether... you know... if you might off yourself.”

“What did you say?” Harry asked.

Ron answered quickly, “I said I wouldn’t bother to lock away the knives.” Harry snorted.

“Do you really think that’s all you are to Dumbledore – the ultimate weapon, or something?” Ron asked.

“I don’t understand him,” Harry said. “He seemed so genuinely concerned about Hermione, the night that she found out about the

prophecy... but he was perfectly willing to use a curse that could kill her, as far as I can see.”

“Bill’s surely angry about it,” Ron allowed. “He explained it to me and Ginny – nasty business, that. I don’t understand why she agreed to it in the first place. What did you have to say about it?”

Harry shook his head. “I thought it was a bad idea from the start. I didn’t want to tell her anything – she guessed that I knew the full prophecy, and started pressing. I tried to stop her, but she asked Dumbledore for this safeguard.”

Ron frowned. “She’s been acting strangely since Sirius’ will was read. I still wonder exactly what he wrote to her.”

“You were right that night,” Harry admitted. “You shouldn’t have signed, and she shouldn’t have signed. Dumbledore destroyed her parchment – did you know that?”

Ron’s eyes widened. “You’re kidding! She agreed to that?”

Harry nodded. “He said it was moot anyway, since she’s not of age.”

“Did you see it – the parchment, I mean?” Ron asked.

Harry blushed slightly. “I did.”

Ron stopped walking. “I have to know – what did it say?”

Harry weighed his request. It stood to reason that the parchment had at least fed the row between Ron and Hermione, and at least part of it was bound to come out sooner or later. “It had a number of things in it – I think they all did. She was supposed to break at least one rule a month at Hogwarts –”

Ron’s eyes lit up. “She agreed to that?”

“Well, it did say that the rule could be minor...” Harry trailed off.

“What?” Ron asked.

Harry said, “I was just waiting to see if I’d be hexed.”

“We were both there that night,” Ron reasoned. “I suppose we’re in the clear.”

Harry cleared his throat. “Right, then. Anyway, there was the bit about the rule... Oh, you’ll love this. She was supposed to help me find and keep true love.”

Ron gaped at him. “What the bloody hell does that mean?”

Harry shrugged. “She seems to think she’s supposed to be my matchmaker. Apparently she has lists, charts... a scoring system...”

Ron cringed. “A scoring system – that figures, doesn’t it. You’re in for a trial, mate...” He stopped. “What is it? There’s something else, isn’t there?”

Harry frowned. Ron knew him too well. “It also said that she wouldn’t forsake me, even if there was a... a terrible price... and... and she didn’t... she didn’t forsake me, no matter what... but now...” He turned away from Ron. He could feel his reserve slipping, and that was the last thing he wanted. Ron’s hand clenched his shoulder.

“I need to know what’s going on between the two of you. I think you owe me that much,” Ron said, his voice cracking.

Harry turned around, prepared to tear into Ron for his presumption. As soon as he met Ron’s eyes, the anger was gone. “Do you love her?” he asked Ron.

Ron took a step back, startled – almost frightened by the question, Harry thought. “I... I don’t... you know I’ve had feelings... I should have asked her to the Yule Ball before that wanker Krum. This is about what happened at the party, right?” Harry looked down at his feet.

“I just needed to know where she stood,” Ron continued. “I needed to know. I’m not afraid to die, you see? It took me a while to realise that, but I’m not. I just don’t want to be... anyway, she made me understand what I’m looking for. She’s my friend, she’s been my friend for a long time, and of course I love her. You do, too. But Lavender... Harry, you don’t know...” He looked at Harry curiously. “At least, I don’t think you know. I suppose that I don’t know if you know – you know?”

Harry chuckled, “I don’t know, Ron – do I?”

“All right... all right... that was a mess, wasn’t it?” Ron admitted. “Look, with Lavender there are no strings whatever. She listened to me, I was there for her, we had great fun, and that’s the end of it unless we both decide otherwise. I’m beginning to appreciate Bill’s outlook on life, you know?” He added nervously, “Can you imagine what being with Hermione would really be like? I mean, could anything be more complicated?”

Harry said quietly, “She’s afraid of me now.”

“I think everyone was afraid,” Ron ventured. “It certainly seemed like we were done for.”

“She flinched,” Harry said. “I reached out to her, and she flinched.”

“You were soaked in blood,” Ron reminded him.

“She should be afraid of me,” Harry whispered.

“I’m not afraid of you,” Ron said.

“Thanks,” Harry said, his eyes downcast.

Lupin strode toward them. “Harry, Madam Bones is asking for us,” he said.

Chapter Sixteen

UNCONTROLLED DESCENT

An Auror showed Harry and Lupin to the Grangers' study. "Madam Bones will meet you here," he said to them. "She stepped out for a moment."

To either side, the walls were lined with heavily loaded bookshelves. Harry turned as the door was closed behind him, and saw that there were more shelves to either side of the door. A large desk faced the door. Lupin peered at the computer that sat on the desk. A bay window and pictures – scores of framed pictures, of all shapes and sizes – dominated the wall opposite the door. Harry rounded the desk and began looking at the pictures. They quickly showed Harry two things that he already knew: that Hermione was an only child, and that the Grangers were well travelled. There were few pictures of all three Grangers – most were of Hermione, her mother, or the both of them. A handful of pictures showed a young Hermione with people who Harry presumed were her grandparents. He began to notice other things, like how Hermione was alone in so many of her childhood pictures – there were no signs of friends or schoolmates – or how she seemed terribly serious, even as a small child.

The door creaked open. "Hello, Tom. A computer, isn't it?" Lupin asked, pointing at the Macintosh.

"It was a Mac, at any rate," Mr. Granger said. "Arthur tells me that all this magic is rather hard on electronics. We couldn't raise a thing on the telly, either."

Harry turned and acknowledged Mr. Granger. "Hello, sir," he mumbled cautiously.

Mr. Granger's expression was neither friendly nor unfriendly. It was sad in a way, but not so sad as to mark pity. Harry had seen that same expression on a number of people over the summer, and wished that he could firmly place it. "I favour that picture," he said, pointing to where Harry had left off. Hermione looked to be a toddler, perhaps three years old. She was holding a worn-looking copy of The

House at Pooh Corner, open and propped against her knees. Her eyes were like saucers and her mouth was slightly open, as though she were reading aloud.

“I’ll never forget that moment,” Mr. Granger reminisced. “Out of nowhere, she began to read on her own. At first, I was certain that she simply remembered the stories. Then she picked up that very book – she knew the characters but we’d never read aloud that particular one – opens to the first page, and calls out, ‘In which a house is built for Eeyore at Pooh Corner’! I very nearly fell out of my chair, I can tell you – dashed off for a camera, and there you have it.”

Harry nodded, but was already drawn to another picture. It looked to be very recent. Hermione was in profile, seated at one of the high-backed benches. Her feet were propped on the table between the benches, and she was reading – of course. Her hair was pulled back in a way Harry had never seen before, but windswept wisps fell against her face; orange light – sunset? – lent a slightly reddish cast to her hair and to the rest of the scene.

Mr. Granger said, “That was her first week back – the only evening without rain, as I recall. She didn’t feel well at all, though she was pretending otherwise. I didn’t want to bother; I just wanted to be near, you know? When I developed that shot, I was bowled over... I thought to myself, ‘good Lord, she looks like a grown woman’.”

Harry felt an odd tightness in his chest simply looking at the picture. He felt a desperate urge to talk to her, to explain somehow, so that he could breathe again. She did look terribly grown up. “I never noticed how much she looks like her mother,” he observed.

Mr. Granger smiled wistfully. “In the end, I suppose that’s why I framed it up,” he said. “Would you like to have it?”

Harry reeled for a moment. “I’m sorry?”

“Would you like it?” Mr. Granger asked. “It’s obvious that you fancy the picture. I can always print another. I can always take another.” He hesitated for a moment, and then added in a strained voice, “I still

have the genuine article, you see... and... and I have you to thank for that.” He removed the frame from the wall, awkwardly thrust it at Harry, and quickly left the room. Harry stood dumbfounded.

Without looking away from the computer, Lupin said, “I believe that the correct response was ‘you’re welcome’.”

Harry gazed at the picture. “He should hate me. Why doesn’t he hate me?” he asked bitterly.

Lupin appeared stung. “Hate you? Whatever for? You saved his daughter’s life today, and you seem intent upon ignoring that fact.”

Harry dropped heavily into one of the two chairs that faced the desk. “I killed those people, and I didn’t have to kill them. I’m a murderer,” he said flatly.

A hand fell firmly atop his shoulder, and gave what felt like a friendly squeeze. Harry hadn’t heard the door.

“You are not a murderer, Harry – despite anything that Minister Fudge or anyone else may have said or implied,” Madam Bones said. “I think that all of us have a mounting interest in how you did what you did. I haven’t interviewed a single person this evening that failed to understand why you did it. Mr. Lupin, you may sit behind the desk if you like.”

Madam Bones slowly settled into the chair that faced Harry. She carefully adjusted her monocle, and appraised him from head to toe. Harry shrank back slightly – he was left with no doubt about who was in charge at that moment.

“When you took action, was Hermione Granger about to be killed?” she asked abruptly.

“Yes,” Harry answered.

“Why are you so certain?”

“The look on her face.”

“What look was that?”

“She was resigned to it – at peace, in a strange way.”

“I see. Who was going to kill her, then?”

“Wormtail. He was trying to... he was using a spell that Dumbledore had cast on Hermione. He was using it as a weapon against her.”

“Wormtail, you say? That name refers to Peter Pettigrew, does it not?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You also claim that Peter Pettigrew was actually responsible for the deaths of your parents, and the deaths of twelve Muggles currently attributed to Sirius Black. Is that correct?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“How are you certain that it was Pettigrew?”

“It was his voice – I have no doubt about that. He also has a metal arm, given to him by Voldemort.”

“How would you know that this metal arm came from Voldemort?”

“I was present when it was given, ma’am, after the Triwizard Tournament at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, of course. I am familiar with those events. So... Mr. Pettigrew was about to kill Miss Granger, using the secondary consequences of a curse that Professor Dumbledore had previously cast upon her. Is that correct, Harry?”

Harry began, “Yes, ma’am...” He froze. The rapid-fire pace of Madam Bones’ questions left him unsteady. He carefully added, “I don’t believe that I called it a curse.”

“No, you did not,” Madam Bones confirmed. “Let us continue with the events of the day, shall we? In addition to Mr. Pettigrew, I understand that Voldemort was present. For which other Death Eaters can you directly account?”

Harry recounted, “Another Death Eater called Mulciber also tortured Hermione. Lucius Malfoy was there as well – he spoke to Mr. Weasley, and I know his voice better than I’d like. Mr. Granger knocked Vincent Crabbe unconscious. Voldemort told me that the Death Eater I... the one I threw from the window was called Travers. I took down three of them who had pinned down Tonks in the yard... Ron and I took down three of them upstairs, perhaps more... I knocked two from the roof... another one cast the Dark Mark, but wasn’t supposed to do it –”

Madam Bones cut in, “Ron Weasley believes that may have been Draco Malfoy.”

Harry fought to remain expressionless. “I thought so, at the time. Whoever cast the Mark knew that they would be summoning Aurors, and knew that they weren’t supposed to cast it.”

“You have doubts that it was young Mr. Malfoy?” Madam Bones asked.

“As I’ve thought about it, the voice seemed too high – it could have been a woman,” Harry said.

Madam Bones continued, “You were bound in the dining room. How were you freed?”

“By Dobby – he Apparated into the dining room, or whatever it is that house elves do.”

“Once you were freed, you moved from a seated position at one end of the dining room table to a standing position at the other end. How did you accomplish this?”

“I don’t know. One instant, I was sitting. The next instant, I had my hands on Wormtail’s throat.”

“It seemed like an instant to you?”

“Yes, ma’am. The ropes came off my ankles, and then I was choking Wormtail.”

“I see. You were furious, then?”

“Yes.”

“Wormtail was killing Miss Granger.”

“Yes.”

“She was in terrible pain.”

“Yes – she was...”

“She was screaming.”

“Yes – it was terrible, it was...”

“It was the most terrible thing you’ve ever heard?”

“Yes – she didn’t even sound human.” Harry’s eyes felt moist.

“You had to do something, didn’t you?”

“Yes!”

“You had to save her, didn’t you?”

“Yes!”

“You had to get to the end of that table, didn’t you? But there wasn’t time, was there?”

“No! I... I didn’t have a wand, and there were seven of them besides Wormtail and Voldemort, and everyone else was there, and Voldemort was going to have them all killed if I –”

“If you so much as moved while Wormtail killed Miss Granger, then everyone else would die, wouldn’t they? Isn’t that what Voldemort told you?”

“Yes! All the Death Eaters had their wands out and –”

“They were going to kill them all, weren’t they? They were going to do it no matter what you did, weren’t they?”

Harry’s hands shook, and he began to sweat profusely at the temples. “They were going to kill everyone there – the Weasleys, Tonks, Hermione and her parents... I couldn’t let them... I couldn’t... I had to stop them... all of them...”

“Yes, you did. You had to get to Wormtail in an instant, and then get every last one of them before there was a single moment to respond, and you had to do it without a wand. You had to get to Wormtail in an instant, didn’t you? You had to get him, didn’t you?”

“Yes, damn it!” Harry shouted as sweat dripped down his nose. “I had to get him! He was hurting her... Voldemort hurt her – he... he forced himself into her mind... I had to get Wormtail... I had to... I had to hurt him! He had to pay for... for everything!” He gripped the arms of his chair, and they fell to pieces in his hands. The glass in the frame on his lap exploded into tiny shards. Madam Bones never flinched.

Lupin put one hand on each of Harry’s shoulders. “It’s over, Harry,” he said soothingly. “It’s over now.”

Madam Bones appraised him again, even more deliberately than before. "I apologise for provoking you. As some of my younger Aurors would say, I was 'playing a hunch'. You would not be human if you felt no sense of vengeance, given the circumstances. It is also clear that you are not suffering from simple adolescent control problems. Harry, tell me honestly... do you believe that you're a danger to others?"

Harry picked up the picture frame, cutting his hands in the process. He looked intently at the picture of Hermione, now peppered with small rips and tears. "I don't know anymore," he croaked. "I didn't know that I could become angry enough to kill. Hermione flinched when I... she..." His fingers left droplets of blood on the picture, and he dropped it. "She's frightened of me," he whispered, and he began to cry.

He cried for his parents. He cried for Cedric Diggory, and he cried for Sirius. He cried for everyone who had ever been hurt because of being with him or knowing him. He cried for Ron, and for Ginny, and for Luna and Neville. He cried for Hermione, because she had been hurt so badly on his account, and because their friendship seemed lost. He noticed that Lupin repaired the glass and the frame and the picture, and he was glad for it. In the picture, Hermione appeared as she should – in his mind, he still saw her screaming in agony. Lupin handed him a tissue, and wrapped a gentle arm around him.

After a seeming eternity, Madam Bones asked quietly, "Harry, what are we going to do with you?"

Harry looked at her questioningly through a haze of tears. "What's that supposed to mean?" he spluttered.

Madam Bones explained, "This is the third time in one week that I have been called upon to intercede in your life. First, there was the will. I think that Albus was dead-on in his assessment, though I am increasingly convinced that Sirius Black may have had his heart in the right place. Then, there was the issue of your status at Hogwarts. As a Governor, I found myself in a very awkward position –"

Harry sat bolt upright. He wiped tears from his face with the back of his hand, and asked angrily, "You're one of the Governors?"

"Yes, I am," Madam Bones said. "We were left with little choice in the matter. When addressing matters relating to you, I consider six of the thirteen votes to be bought and paid for. If not for public relations considerations, I believe that the Governors would have dismissed you outright. But now... Harry, you've been misled enough. I shan't contribute to that pattern. I believe it is highly likely that the Governors will be called to reconvene. I do not expect that we will be able to hold together all seven of the votes available to us."

"Are you saying that I'll be dismissed over this?" Harry asked apprehensively.

"I discussed the possibility a few minutes ago with your Headmaster," Madam Bones answered. "He asked me to consider possible alternatives, and I will do so. I find that I have mixed feelings about your options, especially where Headmaster Dumbledore is concerned. On the one hand, I believe that there is no one more capable than he to help you understand and harness... well... whatever it is that is happening to you. On the other hand, my confidence in his motives has been shaken of late. There is no secret sufficiently important to warrant what he did to Miss Granger. Rather than concentrating on your needs, he appears to have spent the evening preventing others from revealing the secret that Miss Granger kept."

"I had to tell everyone, in order to protect Hermione from the curse," Harry said.

"I don't suppose that you care to share the same information with me?" Madam Bones asked. "The information might clarify his motives in cursing one of his own students."

"Dumbledore wouldn't approve, I'm sure," Harry groused.

Lupin said to Madam Bones, "I daresay that Albus might feel better about it, were you prepared to join in his efforts to resist Voldemort."

Madam Bones ignored Lupin's point. "Harry, I know that there was a prophecy kept in the Department of Mysteries which pertained to you, and that it was destroyed in the fighting," she said. "I assume that you must have heard the entire prophecy. Its contents, whatever they may have been, are of no material bearing upon the matters at hand. The Headmaster's first obligation is to the welfare of his pupils. He has violated that obligation in relation to Miss Granger, and to you as well."

Harry's eyebrows rose slightly. "I understand that I'm in difficulty with the Governors. Are you hinting that Dumbledore might be...?"

Madam Bones smiled faintly. "The Headmaster is in perpetual difficulty with the Governors. It is very nearly a state of being. You appear concerned, Harry."

Harry sighed. "He's done his best, I'm sure."

Madam Bones regarded him with some sympathy. "The Headmaster's relationship with Hogwarts extends back into the previous century – you shoulder responsibility far too readily. I know that he takes that into account, as do many of us with a hand in your welfare. We'll come up with something, Harry."

"I don't care anymore, ma'am. I just want to go home," Harry said dejectedly.

He felt himself being appraised through the monocle yet again, before Madam Bones said, "Very well, then. I presume you are interested to hear my findings?" Harry nodded nervously.

Madam Bones drew up in her chair, and Harry decided that she could easily make Professor McGonagall seem like a cuddly kitten. In a very formal tone, she announced, "Harry James Potter, I find that you bear neither criminal responsibility nor legal liability in the deaths of at least seven and perhaps as many as ten so-called Death Eaters earlier today. Your actions were undertaken principally in the defence of others. I do not believe that you represent any public danger sufficient to warrant action by the Ministry, though I would suggest

that you avoid stressful situations until such time as you are able to... er... establish control over your recently manifested abilities. As you are emancipated and you have acted legally in this matter, I am limited in my ability to mandate your future actions. I very strongly recommend that you make arrangements for some type of counselling. Mr. Lupin, you hold a very important place in Mr. Potter's life, and I fervently hope that you will provide any assistance in this area that Mr. Potter may require. I recognise that such services carry a strong stigma in many segments of the wizarding world, but there are ways around almost everything. As inveterate rule breakers, both of you should know that. Speak to Miss Granger about the events of the past week, at the earliest opportunity – I simply ask that you trust me on this point. Do you have any questions of me?"

"No, ma'am," Harry said nervously.

"Good," Madam Bones said. "Minister Fudge is surely skulking about. He is going to be less than satisfied with my findings. I propose that we both see him and address his unhappiness straight away." She stood, and motioned toward the door.

Madam Bones proved astute; Fudge nearly fell into the room as the door was opened. "Outrageous, Amelia!" he cried. "This is wholly unacceptable. The people shall demand satisfaction!"

Dumbledore closely followed him into the room. "Which people and for what purpose, Cornelius? It may prove personally and politically disadvantageous to consort with those who would demand satisfaction for the loss of a few notable Death Eaters."

Fudge jabbed his index finger toward Harry. "You are a menace to society, Potter – a grave danger. You endanger anyone with the misfortune to be near you, and you have risked the security of our entire world with this sort of brazen skirmish. Even Amelia admits that you are out of control, and it is my sworn responsibility to maintain control and order. I can very easily have you committed to St. Mungo's until such time as we sort out these dangerous powers of yours!"

Mrs. Granger pushed past a beefy Auror and into the study, with a dazed-looking Hermione in tow. She spat at Fudge, "We've had enough of you! If you represent the best of what wizards have to offer, then it's little wonder that this Voldemort of yours is running rampant. I demand that you leave this house, sir!"

Fudge quickly recovered from hearing Voldemort's name spoken aloud, and he attempted something that Harry suspected was supposed to be charm. "Mrs. – ahem – Granger, is it? – I do apologise for the inconvenience all of this has spawned. You're certainly not the first people who have suffered because of Potter, but I will do my level best to assure that you're the last. Of course, my earlier offer remains open. Surely, it would be easier for you if today had simply never happened..."

Mr. Granger glowered at Fudge from the doorway. "Cordelia and I want you and your... your henchmen out of here – now," he warned.

Fudge peered down his nose. "I do hope that was not intended as a threat. My associates do not take kindly to threats." He motioned at the beefy Auror in the doorway.

Madam Bones moved toward Fudge until he was forced to take a step backward. "I will remind you that the gentleman in the doorway works for me," she said.

Dumbledore quietly suggested to Fudge and Madam Bones, "Perhaps the three of us can agree upon a solution that would be in Harry's best interests." Harry crossed his arms and glared.

Mrs. Granger's eyes narrowed. "I've had my fill of you, as well," she said to Dumbledore.

Fudge aimed a sugary-sweet glance toward Hermione. "My dear girl, I'm certain that you can explain this situation in a manner that your parents are able to understand. I realise that the Ministry has stumbled in its efforts to protect your kind, but I promise you here and now –"

Harry saw Hermione's eyes flash at the mention of 'your kind'. She pulled herself from the daze, and cut off Fudge. "Minister, to what kind do you refer?" she asked acidly.

Fudge stammered, "I'm sorry – I don't –"

"You suggested that the Ministry has made efforts to protect 'my kind', though I rather doubt that," Hermione continued. "I think that you should specify the kind to which you refer. I believe that everyone here would appreciate a thorough explanation."

Fudge blustered, "Well, miss, I think that you may be making too much of... it's common parlance, of course..."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "It's common parlance among whom, exactly – certainly not among the Muggle-born? Minister, we await your explanation. In fact, I look forward to reading it in the Daily Prophet tomorrow."

Fudge looked to Madam Bones, who said flatly, "You ought not to leave Miss Granger waiting, Minister."

Harry was enjoying the spectacle of Hermione slowly strangling Fudge with his own remark, when he noticed Lupin looking curiously at the carpeting.

"What is it, Remus?" he asked quietly.

Lupin replied, "Blood."

"Is it mine?" Harry asked.

"No," Lupin said. He knelt, and cautiously sniffed. "Definitely not yours..."

Fudge turned to watch, clearly relieved by the distraction. Mr. Granger peered over Lupin's shoulder. "That blood wasn't here this afternoon," he said.

“I’ve been in this room for the better part of two hours, and I didn’t see it,” Madam Bones added.

Lupin touched the carpet with his finger. “Damp... fresh,” he muttered. He buried his nose to the carpet, and sniffed again. He growled and crawled along a widely scattered trail of droplets, which led from beneath the desk toward the foot of one of the bookshelves. He began tearing books from the shelves wildly.

“Remus! What’s got into you?” Mr. Granger cried out. He tried vainly to catch books as they flew.

Lupin stopped. There was a small hole behind some of the books, which appeared to lead into the wall. He sniffed again, and whirled to face everyone. He looked wild, and his teeth were bared.

“I smell a rat!” he snarled. When he received blank stares, he snapped, “Peter is a rat Animagus! He’s still here!”

Madam Bones’ monocle fell to the end of its chain as her eyebrows shot upward. “Pettigrew is still here!” she exclaimed. She barked to the Auror in the doorway. “Haversham! I want the yard blanketed. Get Arthur Weasley and his sons, and Shacklebolt and Tonks as well – we need everyone looking for a rat. Merlin only knows what he may have heard!”

Harry watched Fudge puff up, in a manner very reminiscent of Uncle Vernon. “Peter – Pettigrew – is – dead,” he firmly insisted.

Dumbledore said calmly, “That statement bears a strong similarity to your attitude regarding Voldemort, prior to recent events. You may wish to exercise some caution in this instance.”

Percy burst into the room and sidled up to Fudge. “Minister, the press are assembled in the front room as you requested. They’re awaiting your statement.”

“In my front room? There are journalists in my front room?” Mr. Granger fumed.

Fudge said hurriedly, "Tell them that I'll be there presently. We need a moment to tidy some loose ends." He turned on Madam Bones. "We must reconsider an untenable decision on the part of one of my subordinates."

Mr. Granger advanced on Percy. They were the same height, but Mr. Granger possessed the presence that Percy lacked. "They will wait outside," he ordered.

Percy muttered something about mad Muggles, and fled the room. He was rudely bumped by Bill as both passed through the doorway. Bill immediately drew his wand and flicked it toward the far wall. Part of the bookcase became transparent, and the inner workings of the wall behind it were revealed. Shacklebolt peered into the bay window from the outside, and Bill gestured for him to come around the corner of the house.

"What is directly above us?" Lupin demanded, his expression still feral.

"Hermione's bedroom," Mrs. Granger answered quickly.

Hermione erupted from the daze to which she had returned. "Ginny's up there!" she gasped.

Somehow, despite standing several feet farther from the door, Harry beat the others out of the study and up the stairs. Lupin was very close at his heels – a low continuous snarl rumbled from his throat. Harry disillusioned himself, silenced the floor, and carefully entered Hermione's bedroom.

Wormtail stood with his back to Hermione's writing desk, opposite the door and away from the window. His silver fingers were wrapped around Ginny's neck tightly enough to leave reddening dimples.

"Hello, Harry," Wormtail said. "I can smell you, just as I can smell Lupin in the hallway. It's a useful consequence of spending twelve years in my rat form. I congratulate you on your prowess. You truly

surprised me earlier – it's safe to say that you surprised my Lord, as well. I dare say that James and Lily would have been proud."

"Never – say – their – names – again," Harry warned as he caused himself to appear.

"I'm sorry, Harry," Wormtail said mournfully. "There's been enough dying here today. Arrange my passage from this house, and I assure you that your friend will live."

"You're pale, Wormtail," said Harry. "You've lost a lot of blood, haven't you?" Wormtail's hair was matted with blood, apparently from a head wound. There were deep bruises on each side of his throat, where Harry's thumbs had dug in.

"I'll live, Harry, though I do appreciate your concern," Wormtail mumbled. "Let me repeat... safe passage off this property – in exchange, the girl lives."

"You won't be going anywhere, Pettigrew," Madam Bones called from the hallway, which was rapidly filling with people.

"Hello, Madam Bones," Pettigrew said. "I truly enjoyed your classes. It's a shame you're no longer teaching at Hogwarts. I assume that the Headmaster is here, as well?"

"Mr. Pettigrew, there are no words that adequately express my disappointment in you," Dumbledore said sadly.

Harry stepped toward Pettigrew. Pettigrew smiled slightly. "Come into my parlour, Harry," he said. Harry felt his hair crackle with a sudden static charge.

"Did you try to ward against us?" Harry asked.

"I'm rather good with wards," Pettigrew said. "Not quite as good as Sirius, but better than James was."

“You defile their names,” Lupin growled as he pushed his way into the room.

“It’s not as though I’m speaking ill of them – simply the truth,” Pettigrew said.

“You know that warding won’t keep me out,” Lupin warned.

“You know that my hand is silver,” Pettigrew reminded him. “A standoff, I think.”

“I would be satisfied to take you with me,” Lupin said darkly.

“Ah... but what about young Miss Weasley?” Pettigrew asked. He tightened his grip slightly. Ginny, already mute from the pressure, gagged audibly. “Shall all three of us journey beyond the veil, Remus?” He called out more loudly. “I suggest that you keep any Aurors or Hit Wizards clear, unless you want Miss Weasley’s blood on your hands.”

“Get him a broom,” Fudge called out from the hallway. “There shall be no more killing today. Pettigrew – or whoever you are – we will allow you to leave, provided that you hand over the girl.”

The hallway fell into bedlam, as half a dozen separate arguments broke out. Harry could see Fudge and Madam Bones snarling at one another. Dumbledore appeared impassive, but Harry realised that he was assessing Wormtail’s wards. He decided to do the same. Harry suspected that he could easily pass through, but he was worried about the hand. For all he knew, it might have a mind of its own – perhaps it would crush Ginny’s throat of its own accord, even if Wormtail were taken out. Lupin looked wilder by the minute, but held his ground near the door. Harry wondered how much longer the threat of silver would hold him at bay.

The crowd in the hall parted and Ron entered the room, bearing his Nimbus. “You didn’t think I went anywhere without it, did you?” he said to Harry.

Wormtail lifted his silver index finger from Ginny's neck, and the Nimbus sailed through the wards into his human hand. No wonder I didn't see him with a wand, Harry thought. With another waggle of his index finger, the window flung open. He dragged Ginny by the neck toward the window. The ward seemed to move with him; Harry felt a surge of static energy, and took two steps back and one to the side.

"She'll be dropped off somewhere suitable," Wormtail said. "After all, my Lord was insistent that her life be spared. I would hate to incur his wrath – though I shall risk it, should any of you interfere."

Ron spat, "If you harm her, you won't have to worry about Voldemort. I will find you, and I will kill you very slowly."

Wormtail said quietly to Ginny, "It's a rare treasure to have such a loyal family." He eased up behind her, and managed to settle both of them onto the Nimbus without losing his grip upon her neck. Through the window, Harry saw a figure sprinting across the yard.

Wormtail laughed. "Ah... I see that Lucius is making his escape!" The hallway erupted, and even Harry was distracted for a moment – just long enough for Wormtail to launch the Nimbus into the darkening sky.

Harry angrily crashed through the lingering ward, which crackled and sizzled before collapsing. The running figure was certainly blond-haired. Madam Bones rushed up behind him. "Merlin!" she shouted. After a quick sonorous, she boomed through the open window, "Stop that man, by any means necessary!" Wormtail continued onward over the neighbouring houses. She cancelled the spell, and turned toward the hallway door. "I want six people in the air after Pettigrew, now! Take shifts – track him, but do nothing to endanger the girl. Kingsley, I hope you're up to tagging along?"

Fudge said, "I believe the Wizengamot will frown upon the use of suspended personnel, Amelia."

Madam Bones glared at Fudge. "I believe the Wizengamot will have a number of questions about today's events, Minister – beginning with Lucius Malfoy and ending with Peter Pettigrew."

As he strode down the hall toward the stairs, Fudge called out, "Weasley! Inform the members of the press that the next briefing will be held tomorrow at eight o'clock, at the Ministry. Tell them... tell them that two additional Death Eaters have been rooted out, and that I am supervising the pursuit. When you're finished, get me a car!"

"Why didn't Wormtail set down and Apparate away?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore stroked his beard. "A fair question, Harry. I don't recall him as a confident flier – he wasn't fit for Quidditch. Any wise wizard is apprehensive about Apparating with an untreated head injury, of course."

Madam Bones nodded. "That certainly does raise the chance of a splinching. There's another possibility – he may intend to take her to Voldemort."

Harry thought about Voldemort's comment in the front room, when he ordered Ginny's life spared. He thundered, "Accio Triumph!" The Bonneville shot across the yard and bounced through the open window and into the bedroom. Ron and Madam Bones barely stepped back in time to avoid being struck, as the motorbike landed roughly on its side and bounced to a stop at Harry's feet. He added "Accio helmet" and his helmet struck him in the chest like a medicine ball, sending him reeling.

"What do you think you're doing?" Madam Bones demanded. "How did you summon that... that thing?"

Lupin snarled, "I'm coming with you."

Harry snapped, "Not a chance, Remus. You're not coming anywhere near that hand of his." Lupin glared at Harry and angrily ran from the room, presumably to join the chase after Lucius Malfoy.

Hermione and her mother remained in the hallway. Hermione said quietly, "Harry, stay away from it. It's Voldemort's hand. Do you understand? It's Voldemort's hand. It would be by his hand..." Harry took a step toward her, and she folded against Mrs. Granger.

Mrs. Granger cradled Hermione. She looked at Harry mournfully and said, "Be sure you come back, young man. Be safe."

"Harry, remove that helmet at once," Madam Bones ordered.

Ron said nervously, "You can't chase after them alone. Did you bring your Nimbus?" Harry understood immediately – Ron intended to come, but not on the motorbike.

"No. Were you wearing a helmet?" Harry asked.

Ron goggled at Harry in confusion. "What?" he managed at last.

"In your vision – were you wearing a helmet?" Harry asked again.

Ron thought for a moment and then grinned. Harry fished for the second helmet in the saddlebag, enlarged it, and tossed it to Ron. Madam Bones stared at Harry in disbelief.

Harry gave what little explanation he could. "I don't understand any of it – the punching, the wandless charms," he said. "If I think about it, I can't do it – that's all I really know."

"Harry..." Dumbledore began.

"What?" Harry blurted, his jaw set.

Dumbledore smiled slightly. "Ride with care, would you? Mr. Weasley, see that Harry keeps hold of his senses."

Seconds later, they rocketed across the midnight blue sky after Wormtail and Ginny. They tore past six Aurors and Shacklebolt, giving chase on Nimbus 2000 brooms. Shacklebolt gave a terse wave as they passed.

"Do you have a plan?" Ron called out.

"No," Harry said. "Any ideas?"

Ron suggested, "You're looking for the Snitch, right? Start climbing, then."

"Right," Harry said. He began climbing higher and higher, to survey the area around them.

"Did you feel that?" Ron asked.

Harry was in Seeker mode, and didn't welcome the interruption. "Feel what?" he snapped.

"Something happened to my ears – it's like they popped or something," Ron said. "I don't think I've ever been this high above the ground before. Do you suppose that has something to do with it?"

"I've heard that people's ears pop on aeroplanes," Harry said absently.

"You mean those Muggle flying contraptions?" Ron asked. "You haven't been on one, have you? My dad would go spare over that."

Harry ignored him, instead concentrating on sorting out the sights before him. He saw a flash of movement that was definitely airborne. He carefully pointed. "What do you think?"

"Moving a bit slow, isn't it?" Ron pointed out.

"He probably doesn't think that anyone gave chase," Harry surmised. "Besides, Dumbledore did say he wasn't a great flier. We'll stay high and close the distance."

After a few minutes, both Harry and Ron were certain they had found the Nimbus. Wormtail was flying a few thousand feet above the ground, heading north. He hadn't yet made good on his promise to drop off Ginny – they could clearly make out two figures.

"How can we sneak up on them?" Harry wondered aloud. "Either he'll hear us coming, or he'll have a Perimeter Charm of some kind. If

we come up from behind, chances are good that he'll toss Ginny over the side."

"That might not be a bad thing," Ron said nonchalantly.

Harry spluttered, "Do you care to explain that, or should I turn toward St. Mungo's now?"

"Could you catch a person in mid-air, given a few thousand feet to do it?" Ron asked.

"I expect so. I certainly wouldn't want to..." Harry mused. "What are you doing?"

Ron turned on the seat until both legs were hanging over the right side of the bike. "I'm going to do Dangerous Dai's Death Drop, more or less," he said calmly. "Either Wormtail drops her, or I shove her off. When she falls, you're going to be below and in position to pick her up."

Harry shrieked, "Dangerous Dai's Death Drop? Have – you – gone – barking – mad? You do that with a broom, for Merlin's sake!"

"I am doing it with a broom – that one," Ron said, pointing down in the direction of the Nimbus.

Harry began, "Dumbledore said..."

Ron laughed, "Dumbledore told me to be sure that you kept hold of your senses – I was listening, you know. He didn't say a thing about me. Pity, isn't it?"

Harry turned at the waist, and frantically grabbed a handful of Ron's shirt. "We must be two thousand feet above them!" he shouted. "What you're considering – it's like diving into a teacup!"

"Didn't you ever jump off roofs for fun when you were a kid...? Oh! I suppose you didn't, did you? Trust me – you'd be surprised just how much you can manoeuvre." Ron tightened the chinstrap on his helmet

until it dug into his flesh. “We can talk to one another with these things, right? You spot me, then – make sure I’m heading in the correct direction.”

“The only direction you’d be going is down! How would I spot you, anyway? It’s getting dark!” Harry protested.

Ron stared deeply into Harry’s eyes. His face was etched with anger and pain. A muscle in his neck twitched. “I’m not losing my sister today,” he snarled.

Harry shouted, “I will not help you commit suicide! You stay – on – this – bike! Do you understand me?”

“If you don’t catch her, you may as well head straight into the pitch. Do you understand ME?” Ron elbowed Harry’s hand free.

Harry quickly reached out, and caught thin air. “Ron! Damn it – RON!”

Ron shouted back, his voice trailing off as he fell away, “Last one down buys the butterbeer!”

The Death Drop was how Dangerous Dai Llewellyn first received his nickname from the Caerphilly fans. In 1956, Caerphilly had been losing to the Karasjok Kites 130-to-nil when Llewellyn spotted the Snitch. Like Harry, Llewellyn liked to search for the Snitch from the highest possible vantage. That particular time, Llewellyn was a solid five hundred feet above the top of the stands. He spotted the Snitch twenty feet behind the Karasjok Seeker. If he made a move, he knew that the other Karasjok players would catch on, alert their Seeker, and the game would be over. So, Llewellyn intentionally fell off his broom. Dangling the broom in one hand by its end, he dove headfirst toward the Karasjok Seeker. Everyone in the stands and everyone on a broom froze in place, certain that Llewellyn would have to be scraped off the pitch. Even the Snitch was fooled. He was less than twenty feet above the opposing Seeker before he hooked his foot around his broom, sat up, and fell hard atop the Snitch. The Karasjok Seeker slipped from his broom, broke his arm, and immediately cried foul. Karasjok didn’t get the foul; Llewellyn never actually touched

either the other Seeker or his broom. Llewellyn got the Snitch; the win; two broken ankles from his 30 miles-per-hour impact into the pitch; and worldwide acclaim.

This version of the Death Drop went well beyond dangerous: one broom, two players, in the twilight... in addition to the aerial stunt that Ron was asking of Harry. Harry expected that Wormtail would be most unenthusiastic about giving up the Nimbus in mid-flight. He pointed the Bonneville nearly straight down and aimed for a point below and beyond Wormtail and Ginny's position.

Harry passed Ron and shot wide, to avoid being seen or detected by Wormtail. Ron looked to be head-down, arms out – he was a little off vertical.

The wind tore at Harry. “He’s about five hundred feet down and fifty ahead of you, give or take,” he shouted against the din.

Ron’s voice crackled inside Harry’s helmet. “I see him! This is... urgh... a wild... oof... ride, Harry...”

“You’re too far behind!” Harry gasped. He tried to imagine how he might catch both Ron and Ginny, if it came to that.

Harry could barely hear Ron – he wondered if the helmets had a limited range, or if Ron was actually having difficulty speaking. Ron’s voice was strained and staccato. “Did I ever – tell you that – Charlie – taught me – how dragons – glide?” he managed. Harry saw an iridescent flash and guessed that Ron was using his jacket as a kind of airfoil.

Wormtail either saw a flash of motion or a Perimeter Charm went off, when Ron was no more than twenty feet away. He looked back and then flung Ginny roughly away – just as Ron had predicted. Ron grabbed the bristles of the Nimbus and pulled, just as Wormtail was pointing his silver hand. Harry was already more than a hundred feet below the Nimbus; he immediately rolled to one side, and set after Ginny. In one of his mirrors he caught a brief glimpse of Ron and Wormtail – both freefalling and grappling for the broomstick, framed

against the last glow of sunset against the high clouds. Harry had no options left for helping Ron, so he completely focussed on Ginny.

Harry was grateful that her shirt was white, as it periodically caught the light from the Bonneville's cat's-eye. She flailed wildly – the billowing of her shirt in the wind kept her from tumbling out of control, but rocked her from side to side. He could descend far faster than Ginny; he just had to adjust and close in before they both fell too far. He dropped at ever-higher speed. The motorbike began to shudder from the buffeting of the wind and the uneven drag. He was little more than a thousand feet above the ground when he caught up with her.

Ginny let out a continuous guttural howl; her eyes were squeezed shut. She heard the eerie whistle of wind and drag coming from the falling Bonneville, opened her eyes, saw Harry, and stopped flailing – she just stared at him. At the same moment, Harry reached out one arm – nearly losing control of the falling motorbike in the process – and shouted, “Accio Ginny!” She sprung into his grasp, eyes slammed shut, and he tugged back hard in an attempt to slow the bike and level its descent. The handlebars shook so violently that Harry began to wonder if the Bonneville might break apart.

The moment she was in his grasp, Ginny latched on tightly. Intuitively, she slid around and behind him. She managed to stay more-or-less on the seat as the bike rocked and shook. At some point he assumed that she reopened her eyes, because she resumed howling. Harry considered joining in, if it would help. As they passed the treetops, the bike was still not quite level; Harry hoped they would strike grass rather than pavement. The Bonneville reached level at almost the same moment as it careened off the surface of a local carriageway. Harry was over-eager with the brakes, and the bike spun 180 degrees as it came to a quick and screeching stop.

A middle-aged woman walking a small, yapping dog shook her fist at them. “Ruffians!” she shouted. “Can’t be about at night without you biker maniacs racing down this roadway! Dropping from the sky at a hundred miles an hour and skidding along ...” She trailed off into a dumb stare and then promptly fainted dead away. The little dog yapped and pranced and licked at her face.

Harry whipped off his helmet. "Ginny, are you all right?" he shouted.

Ginny rubbed at her bruised throat. Her hair was like tangled red straw from the windy fall and her eyes seemed permanently fixed open.

"Ginny, are you all right?" Harry repeated.

She gave a shaky nod and pointed over his shoulder. He whirled around to look. The Nimbus was drifting down the quiet carriageway, its single unsteady rider framed against the ghostly glare of the streetlamps. The broom abruptly nose-dived and the rider bounced and rolled in the thick grass of an unmowed yard. The rider tore his helmet off with one hand, revealing a shock of red hair. Harry and Ginny approached at a dead run.

Ron's mock turtleneck was torn as though a wild animal had attacked him. The remnants of his jacket were wrapped around the Nimbus, which had come to rest several feet away. His left arm dangled awkwardly at his side. He staggered to his feet.

"Ron!" Harry shouted excitedly.

Ron returned the greeting with a crooked smile. "I guess the butterbeer's on me," he groaned.

"Where is he? What happened?" Harry asked.

Ron took a step and winced. "I snatched away the broom," he said. "We were falling, and... and he smiled at me – can you believe that? – and then... and then he disappeared. I can't explain it; he was falling, and then he was just gone." He reached out to Ginny, and gave her a one-armed hug. "Thank Merlin you're all right," he said.

She pulled back, and cleared her throat. Her eyes flared; she managed a few hoarse croaks and pops, frowned, and took a deep breath. With two hands she shoved him at the chest, and squeaked, "Lunatic!"

Wincing, Ron demanded, "What the bloody hell was that for?"

"All your idea," Ginny ground out painfully. "Too crazy for Harry."

"What were we supposed to do – let him carry you off to Voldemort?" Ron asked.

"Could have been killed," Ginny croaked, jabbing her index finger toward him.

Ron smiled. "Not today," he said.

"You!" Ginny squealed at Harry.

Harry stepped back, raising his hands in surrender. "Look, I tried to stop him. I mean, you could hardly call it a plan. I –"

Ginny enveloped him in a hug and buried her head against his shoulder. He awkwardly draped his arms around her. She raised her mouth to his ear and said in a strangled whisper, "You do know how to sweep a girl off her feet."

"Thank Merlin you're all right," Harry whispered back. "There's been enough lost today."

Ginny cleared her throat. "We're still friends, then," she said quietly.

Harry pulled away gently and turned to Ron. "We need to get you some help," he said. "Is your arm broken?"

"Shoulder, I think," Ron said. "He squeezed it with that metal hand."

"That should be a simple fix," Harry said hopefully.

Ron nodded and winced. "Just a basic Quidditch injury... speaking of which, let me fetch my broom. I'm not about to leave a racing broom lying about. Besides, that jacket had a lifetime guarantee; indestructible, they said. I'm taking it back."

Ginny exclaimed hoarsely, "You must be joking!"

"Here's the Nimbus, Ron," Harry called out. "There's nothing left of the jacket, though... hang on – I see some bits over there, under that tree."

A flurry of broom riders appeared from two directions. Shacklebolt dismounted, nodded in recognition, and quickly Apparated away. Two of the Aurors immediately rushed toward Ron. One called out, "We need a medic!"

The Auror that Madam Bones had called Haversham strolled toward them. "That was the most outlandish thing I've ever seen!" he boomed, pointing at Ron. "You should be a stain on this roadway!"

Ron soon found himself seated at kerbside in a conjured chair, attended by three Aurors and a young mediwitch who fawned over him. Harry was suddenly accosted by a gaggle of reporters, who had obviously followed the Aurors. Ginny stayed close to Harry, seemingly frozen by the onslaught.

"Mr. Potter! Mr. Potter! Chazz Barksdale, Daily Prophet!" called a reporter with an accent that Harry couldn't place. "Can you confirm that you personally eliminated six Death Eaters today?"

"Mr. Potter! Ellen Winslow, Daily Prophet! Sources claim that you demonstrated extraordinary powers in your battle with the Death Eaters, including ward-breaking and some new kind of Apparation. Would you care to comment?" asked another reporter who sounded American to Harry.

A flash went off, and then another. Ginny flinched, and clutched at her neck. Harry began to lead her away, but the cluster of reporters closed tightly.

"Is it true that Voldemort was present in the house?"

"There's a rumour that Lucius Malfoy may also have been present. Do you have a comment?"

“Do you have any idea why Minister Fudge refused comment this evening?”

“According to a Ministry spokeswizard, two Death Eaters escaped. We presume you were in pursuit. Did you capture one of the remaining Death Eaters? If so, did you kill him, and where is the body?”

“Mr. Potter! Mr. Potter! Dianna Bragg, Teen Witch Weekly! You’re in the company of Ginny Weasley – is this a sign that you’re spoken for, and have we interrupted a secret tryst?”

Harry made an exasperated attempt to answer the hail of questions. “Yes, he was present... I saw and heard Lucius Malfoy, and so did others... talk to the Minister yourself... we were; it was Peter Pettigrew – that’s right, you heard me – and he took Ginny hostage... you must be joking! Did you hear the last answer, for Merlin’s sake? I’m not spoken for, and I won’t be spoken for. It’s not even safe to be around me!” The writer for Teen Witch Weekly madly scribbled notes and muttered something about dark, brooding, and an extra press run.

Shacklebolt appeared in the midst of the crowd of reporters, and glared menacingly. “Miss Weasley’s parents are here,” he said; “You will excuse us now.” He led Ginny away by the hand, and Harry used the distraction as a means to slip away. He hid behind a tree.

More reporters crowded around Ron and his entourage. Two were talking to the Aurors who had witnessed Ron’s drop, and the rest were firing questions at Ron. Bill had arrived, and seemed to provide Ron with some opportunity to breathe between questions.

“What do you think of the Daily Prophet’s new ghouls?” a familiar voice asked from behind him.

Harry didn’t bother to turn around. “I didn’t see any rocks. You must have crawled out from beneath something, Rita.”

“We’re on a first-name basis now? Does that mean you’ll give me another exclusive?” Rita Skeeter cooed.

“What do you mean by ‘new ghouls’?” Harry asked, ignoring her implication.

“Tough times at the Prophet,” Skeeter said sorrowfully. “New management, you know? They sacked nearly everyone yesterday. That’s how Vox operates: bin the old, and bring in the new from their stable. I have it on good authority that the new look starts tomorrow. The old society biddies are in for a shock, I can tell you. You lived with Muggles, Harry – did you ever see a tabloid?”

“So you’re out of a job? What a pity,” Harry deadpanned.

“I’m just a humble free-lancer, Harry – no connection whatever with the former management,” Skeeter insisted. “I admit to being a bit of a fan of Vox. Who knows what may come next? I think that I’d fit rather well. Perhaps you could put in a good word for me?”

Harry’s nose wrinkled. “I’m just happy that I don’t subscribe,” he said.

Skeeter snorted. “Given the size of your investment, I would have assumed that MacLeish threw in free subscriptions.”

Harry stared at her. “Wha...?”

“There he is! Mr. Potter! Mr. Potter – a word, please!” The reporter with the unusual accent waved his arms wildly.

Skeeter crossed her arms. “Give me an exclusive, and I might be able to save you,” she offered.

Harry eyed her dubiously, but the oncoming horde of reporters represented the devil he didn’t know. He nodded in agreement.

Skeeter took out her Quick-Quote Quill. “You say that Weasley was the last to see Pettigrew?” she asked very loudly.

“Erm... I suppose so. He did throw him off the Nimbus,” Harry said. The reporters stopped moving as one.

“I heard something about a Death Drop – I assume that was a reference to Dai Llewellyn?” Skeeter continued.

“It was a Death Drop, all right – without a broom!” Harry responded. “Two thousand feet in the dark! I tried to stop him, but he had none of it.” The reporters at the back of the group were already rushing madly toward Ron. The reporter with the unusual accent looked at Harry curiously, but eventually followed his colleagues.

“Nicely done,” Harry acknowledged.

Skeeter shrugged. “Your friend looks to be enjoying the attention. I’m very clear about your feelings on that point. You’re almost as clear as Granger.” She looked around nervously. “She didn’t come with you, did she?”

“Hermione wants very little to do with me, at the moment,” Harry said flatly.

Skeeter’s eyes narrowed into slits. “Really? How very interesting –”

Harry cut her off. “Go there, and we’re finished – understood?”

“Fair enough,” Skeeter said. “Your love life’s been overdone of late. Let’s discuss six dead Death Eaters, shall we?”

Harry gave an emotionless account of the events at the Grangers’ house, omitting any references to the prophecy and downplaying Hermione’s ordeal. Skeeter betrayed little reaction until Harry described the climactic moments in the dining room. She prodded him for more detail about the scene, and winced when it came.

“I received the strong sense that Fudge didn’t care for Bones’ assessment,” Skeeter finally said. “He doesn’t walk out on the press unless he can’t get his way.”

Harry shrugged. "Fudge said I'm a menace. He threatened me with a stay at St. Mungo's."

Rita Skeeter flashed an evil grin. "I'll have to use that. It comes from an unidentified Ministry source, of course."

"Not a fan of Fudge?" Harry asked her.

She sighed. "I bought the Ministry line on you. It was far easier to believe that you were a liar than to believe that You-Know-Who was back. That said, you were in the right, and I'm certainly no fan of Fudge."

"You'll love this, then," Harry said. He recounted in detail Fudge's exchange with Hermione.

" ' Your kind'? He said 'your kind'?" she gasped. "You're not paraphrasing – that's a quote?"

Harry nodded, and Skeeter rubbed her hands together in glee. "I'll have my own by-line on this one – Lovegood won't be able to resist me," she cackled.

A large bird raced out of the darkness toward Harry. As it neared, Harry determined that it was a raven. When it cawed, Harry noticed that some of the new Daily Prophet reporters quickly stopped what they were doing – they watched for its destination with a certain wariness. The raven settled on the ground at Harry's feet, and deposited a letter. The envelope was addressed:

Harry James Potter, Earl of Bercliffe

Beneath The Large Oak

Grantham Lane

Cottingham

Skeeter peered over Harry's shoulder. "Begging your pardon, milord," she said sarcastically.

"This must be some kind of joke – one of Ron's brothers, probably," Harry guessed. He turned over the envelope. The wax seal was ornately stamped with a filigreed "M" and a shield crest. He carefully examined the seal and the remainder of the envelope, before choosing to open it.

The envelope contained a printed card:

You and a guest of your choosing are cordially invited to celebrate

the acquisition of the Daily Prophet

by Vox Populi, Ltd.,

a subsidiary of Vox International, LLC

Saturday, September 21

MacLeish Manor

Pevensey, Sussex

Social hour – 5:00 PM

Dinner – 6:00 PM

Musical performance – 9:00 PM

Vox Humana recording artist Heather Magruder

and the Edinburgh Festival Orchestra,

at Queen's Hall in Edinburgh

RSVP by August 31 to Catriona Wilton at the Daily Prophet

via owl post, or .

“What’s that babble at the end – some kind of company post, perhaps?” Skeeter wondered aloud.

Harry shrugged, and turned over the card. There was a handwritten note on the back:

- - - - -

Mr. Potter (or Lord Black, if it suits your fancy) –

I am most anxious to meet you. I regret that there is no earlier opportunity. I accept very few business partners, and I am accustomed to cultivating close relationships with those partners. We have much to discuss, you and I. My daughter and I would be pleased to host you for the weekend, if you wish. Consider it a gesture of thanks for the fine castle. Make your arrangements via Miss Wilton.

Best,

Keith MacLeish

- - - - -

Harry stared at the card, shocked and terribly confused.

“I’d love to be a fly on the wall at that party,” Skeeter mused. When Harry shot her a menacing look, she added in protest, “My Animagus form is not a fly, thank you very much.”

“I’m so tired of all of this... I’m just so tired. Can you understand that?” Harry sighed.

Skeeter looked at him curiously, but nodded. “You held up your end of the bargain,” she said. “We’ll be seeing one another soon, I expect.”

“I doubt that,” Harry said absently. He looked around at the massed crowd, which was chiefly composed of reporters, Aurors and Weasleys. A nondescript car pulled up. Percy dashed out, absently opened the door for Fudge, and quickly sought out Ginny. Mrs. Weasley made her way to Ron, and alternated between hugging him and beating him with a small handbag. Harry took advantage of the confusion by making his way to the abandoned Bonneville. He righted the motorbike and rode quickly through the madding crowd and into the darkness.

Chapter Seventeen

MOVING ON

August 5, 1996

Mister Harry James Potter

In care of Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Dear Mister Potter:

The Board of Governors is pleased that you survived the August 4 attack upon your person by so-called Death Eaters, and joins the Minister for Magic in commending you for your efforts to save the lives of three Hogwarts students and several members of their families.

It has come to our attention that the powerful abilities manifested in response to this attack are not under your conscious control. We bear responsibility for the welfare of all Hogwarts students, and are gravely concerned by the risk that you may unwittingly pose. Upon consultation with Ministry-approved experts, we have concluded that you cannot reasonably expect to gain control of these abilities in the near term; in fact, their basis and genesis are wholly unclear.

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry reserves the right to dismiss any student whose conduct is considered harmful to himself/herself or to the school (HSWW Charter, Article IX, Sec. LVII, Par. XXIV [amended]). Given the uncertain and dangerous nature of your abilities, and the minimal chance that you will gain control of these abilities within the normal period of your attendance at Hogwarts; the Board of Governors orders the Headmaster to dismiss you forthwith from your program of study at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

This dismissal is not a reflection upon your academic or practical performance in any fashion, nor does it abrogate any commendations

or awards earned as a consequence of your attendance. To that end, the Chair of the Board of Governors is authorised to prepare a letter of recommendation for inclusion in your permanent record.

Your superior performance on the Ordinary Wizarding Level examinations, your collected behaviour and skilful action in the face of adversity, and your formidable reputation throughout the wizarding world are all indications that you will have excellent prospects despite this decision. The Board of Governors wishes you well in your future pursuits, and fervently hopes that you will be able to make alternative educational arrangements. To that end, we authorise the Headmaster to place the full force and resources of the institution at your disposal.

Sincerely yours,

Edward Parkinson

Vice Chair, Board of Governors

Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

* * * * *

August 6, 1996

Harry picked up the coffee table that set before the fireplace. He hefted it by its end, and sent it flying through the bay windows. Glass rained down into the small yard below. It felt good.

Hedwig flapped mournfully about the bedroom, and attempted to remain clear of Harry's rampage. Her cage was toppled and bent. Harry dragged his school trunk out of the closet. He lifted the empty trunk high over his head, and tossed it through the broken window. The remaining bits of glass that clung to the cracked frame lost their hold.

The previous nine days played through his mind, fast then slow, slow then fast, clear to distorted to clear. The letter from the Governors hurt him deeply, but Madam Bones had predicted it. In the end - the bitter end - all he could see before him was Hermione's agony, and

all he could hear were her screams as Voldemort had torn into her mind.

“I’m going to kill him, Hedwig!” Harry raged. “I’m going to kill him, and I’m going to put an end to all of this!”

He toppled the couch. The anger coursed through him so strongly that his entire head burned and his vision darkened around the edges. He methodically shredded the cushions with his hands. The fabric blackened and heat licked at him. When there was nothing left he cried out in fury and pain, and the plastered walls cracked in several places.

He wrapped his hands around the sides of the writing desk, pulled and swung. The desk shattered against the headboard of the bed. Loose papers flew and then fluttered to the floor. He pulled at the red and gold hangings that framed the headboard and tore them from end to end, then tossed the remains atop the bed. Brandishing a broken leg from the writing desk, Harry swung at the bedposts until they cracked and fell.

He gulped in great heaving breaths as he looked around the ruined room. Another pane of cracked glass slid from its frame and broke into slivers that blanketed the wooden floor. It didn’t feel good anymore, he decided. Hedwig settled atop the intact armchair, and the room went silent except for a gentle but insistent rapping.

Harry was spent. “Go away,” he said.

“I need to see that you’re all right,” Lupin called through the door. “It doesn’t sound good in there, Harry. Would you please let me in?”

“Suit yourself,” Harry said. The door unlocked.

Lupin opened the door and peered in cautiously. “No structural damage, I trust?” he joked. Harry said nothing.

“The Weasleys are very grateful for Ginny’s rescue, you know,” Lupin told him. “Ron, Bill and Fred are still here, if you care to know that. They would tell you the same.”

“It was all Ron. I just had to catch her,” said Harry flatly.

“Dumbledore wishes to see you,” Lupin told him.

Harry felt the rage stir inside. “I don’t want to see him,” he spat. “I’m not sure who I hate more – him or Voldemort.”

Lupin stared at the floor for a long time. Finally, he said, “He will doubtless stay here until he sees you. Would you please let him come in?”

Harry barely nodded. Lupin rose and opened the door, and Harry saw Dumbledore at the head of the stairs.

“I’ll see him alone,” Harry ordered. Lupin looked as though he were about to say something, but stopped himself and left the room.

“Good morning, Harry,” Dumbledore said, his eyes slowly moving across the damage. “Your taste in décor has changed somewhat since I last visited.”

“Say what you need to say, and then go,” Harry snarled, his fists balled.

“Ah... the letter from the Board of Governors must lie somewhere amidst the debris. No, Harry – the Board’s work speaks for itself. I had thought that I might return your wand,” Dumbledore said calmly, “but your demeanour in recent hours suggests otherwise.” He waved his hand and the door closed behind him.

“I don’t need it, and I don’t give a damn about the letter or the bloody Board of Governors,” Harry said murderously.

“Mind your language, please. You most certainly do need your wand,” Dumbledore said. “I shall leave it with Remus.”

Harry refused to look at him, for fear of what might happen next. "Snap it in two, for all I care."

Dumbledore regarded him carefully. "Surely you do not mean that."

"It's done nothing but bring trouble, to me and everyone else," Harry fumed.

"I see. Would you have preferred spending your adolescence in the Dursley's cupboard?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry felt the anger rise again. "You're the one who chose them, who insisted on them," he growled.

Dumbledore appeared to be weighing something in his mind. He waited for a time, and then said, "I understand. We shall not be discussing your wand, or the friends you have made, or the lives you have saved, or any of the positive experiences that you have had over the last five years. We shall be discussing the ways in which I have brought you grief."

Harry moved toward Dumbledore menacingly. Dumbledore did not move. "You could have killed her," Harry snarled. "You knew exactly what you were doing to her!"

Dumbledore said nothing as Harry closed in. He waited until Harry came to a stop, inches away. "I have missed the mark, it seems," he responded. "Our conversation is to be focused on Miss Granger. It seems that you require an apology. Very well, Harry. I am sorry that the safeguarding charm —"

"Sorry doesn't wash! That was no charm, it was an effing curse — and don't you dare lecture me about my language," Harry seethed through clenched teeth. "If I had understood, I would have tossed you out that night."

Dumbledore remained implacable, which irritated Harry all the more. "Miss Granger is a brilliant witch. Do you not think that she

understood the risks associated with a spell of that nature? Do you not think that she understood what was at stake?”

“ ‘I am loathe to employ it...’ ” Harry mocked. “What rot! She asked because you offered – you baited her into it!”

“I did no such thing, Harry,” Dumbledore assured him. “I trusted that Miss Granger possessed the maturity to consider her options. I withdrew an option, and she refused to have it withdrawn. That was my first mistake; I should have persisted. It was necessary that she clear her mind of all but the secret to be safeguarded. I overestimated her ability to do this, and that was my second mistake. I admit to you that it could have been catastrophic in her case. Would you believe that Miss Granger was possessed of at least twenty-six discrete conscious thoughts at the time that I cast the spell? I share Professor Flitwick’s admiration of her intellect. The professor devoted a good portion of yesterday to sifting through the shadows of the intended safeguard. When unconscious thoughts were taken into account, the number of facets was formidable.”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses. When were you planning to remove it from ME?” Harry seethed.

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow. “Did you feel any sensation yesterday in the vicinity of the runes, Harry? It may have been an itch you couldn’t seem to scratch, or tingling, or even burning.”

Harry crossed his arms. “I had a lot of time to think yesterday. I imagine I would have noticed if my hand hurt.”

“That is most curious,” Dumbledore said. “May I?” He reached for Harry’s hand, and gave his wand a complex wave. Three runes appeared in ghostly blue.

“Well?” Harry asked impatiently.

“These runes should not be present... and they are not the same runes that were cast in the safeguarding,” Dumbledore said. He sounded apprehensive, and Harry suddenly felt cold.

“I... I didn’t do anything,” Harry insisted. “Did... did Voldemort...?”

Dumbledore continued to carefully examine Harry’s hand. “One of the runes gives me pause, but I do not believe that Voldemort is responsible. The changes are quite interesting... have you studied Ancient Runes, Harry?”

“No, I took Care of Magical Creatures,” Harry said.

“Ah, of course. I shall attempt an explanation. Magical runes are divided into three categories, known as aetts,” Dumbledore explained. “Runic spellcrafting typically draws one rune from each of the three aetts. The safeguarding spell employed uruz to strengthen the will, perþ to keep mysteries hidden and secret, and inguz for grounding – to keep the mind from ascending unfettered. Do you understand?”

Harry thought hard. “All three sound related to Occlumency,” he offered.

Dumbledore smiled. “Very good. It was perþ that we believe caused Miss Granger’s discomfort. Tell me – why were the runes cast on the both of you?”

Harry struggled for an answer, and one came to him. “Because she couldn’t practice Occlumency, and I could. You... you tied us together.”

“Excellent – you may take to spellcrafting rather easily,” Dumbledore complimented him.

“So why did they change?” Harry asked nervously.

“That is the question of the day, is it not?” Dumbledore took the tip of his wand, and highlighted the first rune. “Uruz has been replaced by gebo, the gift. This typically strengthens a relationship. It implies the acceptance of a debt – not a wizard’s debt, but one that does not require repayment. Perþ has been replaced by naupiz, the need. This indicates an imbalance, a need to be fulfilled. Inguz has been

replaced by eihwaz, the sign of change. Eihwaz usually reflects the process of unearthing mysteries, of confronting one's deepest fears."

"That third one, it looks like a tree," Harry noticed.

"Eihwaz signifies the yew tree," Dumbledore said gravely.

Harry pulled his hand free. "Voldemort's wand..."

"Eihwaz also refers to death and immortality, but only when used alone. Again, I do not believe that Voldemort is responsible for the change," Dumbledore assured him. "What were you thinking of, yesterday afternoon?"

"A lot of things," Harry said sullenly.

"Of that I have no doubt. I shall have Professor Flitwick enquire after Miss Granger. I wonder if perhaps the runes have returned to her hand?" Dumbledore asked no one in particular.

"As long as the safeguard is gone, I'm satisfied," Harry snapped.

"It is removed to the greatest extent possible. Miss Granger may have had more on her mind than either Professor Flitwick or I could discern," Dumbledore told him, and then added curtly, "In any case, the safeguard is no longer necessary or even useful. Voldemort will shortly be aware of the entire prophecy, if that is not in fact already the case."

"I don't regret what I did," Harry insisted.

"When Miss Granger —" Dumbledore began.

Harry cut Dumbledore off. "I see that you're no longer on a first-name basis with Hermione, by the way," he sneered. "Why is that, I wonder?"

Dumbledore's reserve seemed to crack a bit, and he frowned. "I committed an error that put her at risk, and I have acknowledged that

to her – and to you. It is painful to realise for the first time that authorities are imperfect, but that experience is part of leaving childhood behind. You would do well to remember that. I am fallible, Harry. I have always been fallible. Until recently, you have possessed neither the sophistication nor the inclination to notice. I will have to once again earn Miss Granger's trust." He paused, and added for emphasis, "We may share that burden in common."

"I know that," Harry said darkly. "Every time I think of her, I see her flinching at the sight of me. She was my best friend. She was the best friend I could ever have hoped for, and now... I don't know. I don't regret it, though. She's still alive, and that's enough."

"You most certainly regret your actions, Harry," Dumbledore chided him. "I could feel the pain of your regret the moment that I entered the Granger's home. In fact, I would be concerned if you were not regretful. However, there is more that weighs upon you."

Harry crossed his arms, and sneered, "You understand me so well – go on, then."

Dumbledore explained, "You saved Miss Granger's life, without question – and the lives of everyone else confined within that room – but you were not able to protect her from harm. Voldemort and his servants violated her mind in unspeakable and unforgivable ways, and you were forced to sit idly by. Her pain injured you nearly as much as you would have been injured by her death. I believe this may be part of the reason that the runes were perpetuated and changed. Even that is not the worst of it."

"Oh, I can hardly wait," Harry said in a scathing monotone worthy of Snape.

"Miss Granger may have been the only person in whom you vested absolute trust. Your trust has been shaken. You feel that there is no one left to trust. You believe that you are alone," Dumbledore concluded.

Harry shouted, "I should be alone!"

“You cannot be alone. We must assume that Voldemort possesses the entire prophecy. We know that he performed Legilimency upon Mr. Granger. It is possible that he holds a connection of some kind with Miss Weasley; I am surprised that you did not consider that possibility. You no longer possess any margin of safety. He will come for you,” said Dumbledore.

“He wants something from me,” Harry mused. “He could easily have killed me, but he didn’t.”

Dumbledore said forcefully, “Harry, Voldemort will know that I cannot kill him. He has no reason to fear me, or anyone other than you. The lives of his followers are meaningless to him. Can you envision the horrors ahead?”

Harry nodded. “That’s why I have to kill him soon,” he said calmly.

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose. “You are unprepared for single combat with Voldemort. He would surely kill you.”

“Then I’ll take him with me,” Harry blustered.

“You must not do that, Harry. I must be sure that there is no confusion in your mind on this point. You must not do that. You must defeat him, and you must survive,” Dumbledore insisted.

“What – is there another prophecy? Something else you’ve neglected to tell me?” Harry sneered

“None of which I am aware,” Dumbledore answered. “It is very likely that Tom’s death will drive his remaining followers to ever darker and more desperate acts. The side of light will need your skills and your leadership for some time to come.”

Harry’s voice quaked with barely restrained anger. “Your masters don’t agree.”

Dumbledore sighed. "Do you refer to the Board of Governors? I am accountable to the Board; that is not the same as servitude. You must know that the Board of Governors is of more than one mind, Harry. Could you not read between the lines of the letter that you were sent? Did you not notice that the vice-chair, and not the chair signed it? Did you not see that –?"

"It's done," Harry snarled.

"You will be trained, Harry. You will be trained, you will defeat Voldemort, you will live, and you will lead," Dumbledore said matter-of-factly. "That path may seem unattainable to you at this moment, but it is not."

"That's ridiculous," Harry said dismissively.

"You will be trained. You can still become a truly great Auror, just as Professor McGonagall promised you... perhaps the greatest to ever serve," Dumbledore promised.

"No," Harry said.

Dumbledore insisted, "I mean that sincerely. You possess all the talents required –"

"No!" shouted Harry.

Dumbledore was clearly taken aback. "I am sorry, but I do not understand."

"I don't want to be an Auror anymore, and I certainly don't want to work for the ruddy Ministry," Harry raged. "I know what I am. Don't worry; I'll be your weapon. I'll learn to kill him, and I'll do it for you... but that will be the end of it, do you hear? I'll be done with all of it, and all of you!"

Dumbledore appeared profoundly sad. "How is it that you have lost yourself so easily?" he asked quietly.

“How would you know if I were lost? You don’t know me at all. You know the Boy-Who-Lived,” Harry shot back.

Dumbledore regarded Harry for quite some time, long enough for Harry to descend from anger to hard breathing to uncomfortable stillness. Then the Headmaster of Hogwarts drew himself up, and once again became the very image of poise and control. “I do not believe that to be true,” he said. “If it proves to be true, however, then I hope to rectify that shortcoming over the next two years. The Board of Governors promised the full force and resources of the institution in support of your alternative education, and I intend to hold them to their promise. You will be trained, Harry – as my apprentice.”

Harry was stunned by the offer. “Erm... I don’t know...”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “You seem resistant to my proposition. Perhaps I should demonstrate my bona fides.” Dumbledore withdrew his wand, and handed it to Harry. He slowly turned, his gaze carefully drawn across every surface of the room. When he completed a full rotation, he closed his eyes and again slowly turned, drawing slow and deep breaths as he moved. At the end of the second rotation, he held out his hands, palms out, and said in a lingering whisper that shattered the quiet, “Reparo...” As he turned a third time, the room reassembled itself in a slow-moving wave that followed the lead of Dumbledore’s outstretched hands. At the end of the third rotation, there was no evidence that anything in the room had ever been touched. The contents of the desk and bookshelf were returned to their rightful places. Even the coffee table and the school trunk flew back into the room, before the windows were reconstructed. Dumbledore stopped, and slowly opened his eyes.

Remembering the night when Dumbledore had cast the safeguard, Harry quickly fetched one of the armchairs. Dumbledore lightly sat, and smiled kindly at Harry. “That was pure Light magic, Harry. I feel mildly refreshed, in truth.”

Harry clumsily returned Dumbledore’s wand. Deep inside, he was tremendously impressed. He knew full well that Dumbledore might be the only wizard who could prepare him to kill Voldemort. Still, he remembered reading or hearing about apprenticeship arrangements.

They were employed widely through the nineteenth century, and they struck Harry as being a step removed from enslavement. Being bound to Dumbledore was not something that Harry found appealing in the slightest.

“I might be interested,” Harry said, “but I’m not cut out to be a servant.”

Dumbledore patted him on the shoulder. “I lack the ego for a traditional apprenticeship arrangement, Harry. All of that fawning and bowing and scraping... I simply have no use for it. You say that you are interested in considering apprenticeship. I am glad for the opportunity. You will report to my office at nine o’clock on August the 30th. At that time, we shall decide whether to put an apprenticeship agreement into force. There are faculty meetings scheduled for the remainder of that day, which you should plan to attend. I will visit you at least once prior to that time, so that we can discuss the apprenticeship and whatever else may be on your mind. We will also address your living arrangements at that time.”

“I said I’m interested. I didn’t say I’d do it. As for living arrangements, if I do this, I expect that I’ll be commuting from Hogsmeade or elsewhere,” Harry said firmly, and surprising himself.

Dumbledore said, “We will discuss that point. It may be necessary for you to remain on the Hogwarts grounds –”

Harry instinctively reacted. “What’s the point in that, if I can no longer be kept safe?” he demanded.

“If Voldemort no longer fears me, then your presence may be the only barrier to a direct attack upon Hogwarts,” explained Dumbledore.

Deflated, Harry simply said, “I see.”

Dumbledore’s clear blue eyes bore into Harry. “I remain curious about the runes. Is there anything else that you need to tell me?”

Harry clearly felt Dumbledore's presence drifting at the edge of his thoughts. Legilimency was little more than a lie detector unless forcefully directed, Harry understood, but he wondered how many times over the years Dumbledore might have silently tested his honesty. Angrily, Harry summoned his memory of Hermione's agony as Wormtail used the safeguard to torture her – it was very easily recovered. Dumbledore recoiled slightly, and Harry felt his presence withdraw.

"Yes, there is," Harry said, a sharp edge to his voice. "I want you to stay out of my mind. Please leave now."

"Your Occlumency abilities are improving rapidly, Harry," Dumbledore said. "I shall see you within a few days. You would do well to stay close to Grimmauld Place, for the time being." He left Harry's bedroom without a backward glance.

Harry closed and locked the door. The idea of remaining in the house on Grimmauld Place was little more appealing to Harry than it had been to Sirius. He looked to the box that Sirius had left to him, and then to his mother's school chest. Not yet, he thought. I just can't. He opened Sirius' box, and his eyes stopped upon the envelope labelled 'Orion's Belt'. Unable to resist, Harry took out the envelope and opened it. Inside were three loose keys and a full page of parchment that looked as if it had been torn from a journal. Harry removed the page and began to read.

- - - - -

March 25

Harry –

Hello, there. You must be tiring of correspondence from your dead godfather, but it can't be helped. If you're reading this, then it's summertime and my will has been enforced. Good. Not the dead part, of course. You're free now, but freedom requires both the opportunity and the proper place. Grimmauld Place is a mausoleum, as far as I'm concerned. Luckily, I've a better alternative for you.

The House of Black used to hold an enormous amount of property. We played all sides in Scottish politics, wizarding and Muggle alike. We stole cattle with the MacGregors; in fact, the word “blackmail” originated with my ancestors. Under the law they’re your ancestors now as well, though that’s as much curse as blessing. We also conspired against the MacGregors with the Campbells. As a result, we ended up with fiefs and peerage. The principal male heir of the House of Black technically holds the title Earl of Bercliffe. Since I’m dead, that makes you the Earl. It means little, as the wizarding titles were hidden from the peerage rolls long ago.

I’ve charged Diggle to unload most of the property held by the Black Trust, including the family manor in Sussex. Most people would rather receive money than land, and even the Weasleys couldn’t use a 40-room manor with a keep and thousands of acres (not to mention that manors are drafty, expensive to maintain, and frequently riddled with boggarts and other lovelies). He’s to restock the coffers of the Trust with the proceeds, and put the rest in investments for you. I’m sure Gringotts will have all the details. Diggle’s a bit dodgy, but he means well and I think that he has your interests at heart.

There are two properties from the Trust for you, besides the mausoleum. Both are on the family’s ancestral lands in Scotland. One was the place where we would summer with our cousins. Andromeda was my favourite, of course. I know Narcissa’s a Malfoy now, and I know I had unpleasant things to say about her last summer, but you need to understand that she was different when I was a lad. Bellatrix was born a bitch, I’m afraid. My brother Regulus was around in those days, as well. Reggie was wild like me, but whip smart like Andromeda. It’s a shame he turned out as he did. I have a few good memories. The family situation only went to hell when I set off to Hogwarts, not that I regret parting ways with dear old Mother and Father. The portrait shows Mother on one of her better days, truth be told. The main building is a tower house, built around 1500. It had a few ghosts, but they were fairly tame. It was leased to Muggles in the ‘80s, as I understand it, but has been vacant for a few years. The house is on about a thousand acres, south of St. Ebb on the coast. You have a quarter-mile of your own beach at the base of the cliffs.

There are two huge stacks, one at either end of the beach. You could follow the beach behind the northernmost stack if you like.

The other property is called Orion's Belt. It's a bothy atop the cliffs to the south of the tower house. It was always my favourite part of the place. Moony, Prongs and I used to sneak there from time to time. Wormtail (the rotten bastard) was always too much a coward for that. Prongs and I spent part of the summer after graduation there. I lived in it periodically after that. Your parents used it a time or two. Who knows? Perhaps you've been there, in a fashion.

I was lusting after Muggle women in those days, so there's not a magical thing to be found inside. It's even set for power and plumbing and such. It has wards, but they're cast around it rather than against it; don't move any boulders or flagstones placed in the area. The wards are unusual. Muggles can see the bothy, but wizards can't see it unless you give them permission. Think of it as a limited Fidelius. Phineas Nigellus came up with it (he was a total bastard, reputedly, but definitely a genius). Mother and Father were a quarter mile away from me for an entire summer, and hadn't the slightest idea. I don't think there's anyone left alive except Moony who had permission from me. You should know that the wards also dampen spells and block Apparation. If you take your wand or anything else that's charmed, then be sure to stow it in the lead box beside the wood stove.

There were times when I just needed somewhere to get away from all the scheming and the fighting and the rubbish. The bothy was perfect for that. I reason that you'll need that, more than I ever did. In the event of my death, you'll find that both the tower house and the bothy have been fixed up and made ready for you. Tell Dumbledore and his watchdogs to sod off, and have a visit. Toss a pebble or two over the cliffs. Walk the beach. Watch the sunrise. Howl at the moon. Share the place with someone special, live it up with your friends, or keep it all to yourself. Drink a toast for me. Better yet, drink one for all of us. I assure you, we're watching.

Good luck, lad.

- S.B.

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Harry shook the envelope, and the keys fell into his hand. A small scrap of parchment covered with loop script fell along with them. It said:

The tower house is located at 1 Lissance Lane, Bercliffe. Stand at the main entry to the tower, and face directly toward the southernmost stack. You will see the bothy, which is exactly one-quarter mile away.

Harry presumed that he had to read the message on the scrap before he could see the bothy, just as he'd been shown the address to Grimmauld Place before his first visit there. He tucked the scrap and the keys into one of his pockets. Insistent pounding at the door pulled Harry from his thoughts.

“Go – away!” Harry shouted.

Ron called through the door, “We just want to see that you’re all right, Harry. We’ve been bloody patient about it!”

Bill added, “It sounded like a brawl in there. Remus isn’t talking, and Dumbledore left. That leaves us to assume the worst, you know.”

“Bill, I was fond of Chapter 11 in Scandalous Tactics for Duelling. Don’t test me,” Harry growled. On the other side of the door, Bill snorted.

“What about it?” Fred asked.

Bill explained with a chuckle, “It’s a very memorable chapter. The title is ‘Why Challenge Your Opponent’s Manhood, When You Can Remove It Instead?’”

Fred howled, “Harry, if you come within a foot of my manhood, I will personally prepare all of your meals for the next year! Get accustomed to feathers!”

“I’m not joking. Go – away; all of you!” Harry snarled. As he began to walk away, he noticed the thin trail of an Extendable Ear peeking under the door. He dropped to his hands and knees, crept forward, put his mouth to the end of the Ear, and shouted, “GO AWAY!” There was a shriek, accompanied by the telltale thump of falling-body-against-wooden-floor.

“Harry, don’t be like this,” Ron pleaded.

Harry snapped, “Like what – at wit’s end? Too late, I’m already there!” He heard a popping sound and spun, fists raised. Dobby cowered, and Harry lowered his hands.

The house-elf surveyed the room, and called out, “Harry Potter is all right, sirs.”

“See? I’m fine. Go – away!” Harry yelled toward the door.

Dobby shook his head. “Professor Dumbledore must have brought house-elves to repair Harry Potter’s room... Dobby is grateful, but Dobby could have fixed everything on his own.”

“You can leave now,” Harry said firmly.

Dobby’s face fell. “Dobby does not wish to leave. Dobby has sworn to serve Harry Potter.”

Harry took a deep breath. “I meant that you should leave the room,” he said. “I don’t want you to leave Grimmauld Place, unless that is what you want.”

Dobby put his hands on his hips, striking a caricature of Mrs. Weasley. “Dobby does not serve this house,” he insisted firmly. “Dobby serves Harry Potter. It is important that Harry Potter understand the difference.”

Harry simply couldn’t bring himself to be angry at Dobby. Perhaps there is someone I can trust completely, he thought. He moved to kneel beside Dobby, and Dobby shifted nervously from one foot to

the other. "You saved my life again, Dobby. Those Death Eaters would have killed all of us. I'm accumulating a very large wizarding debt to you, you know," Harry said.

Dobby's eyes widened. "It is not possible for Harry Potter to owe a wizarding debt to Dobby," he said in awe. "Harry Potter surely does not know what he is saying... not that Dobby questions!"

Harry smiled slightly. "You may question as often as you like," he said. "How can I repay you?"

Dobby asked, "Re... pay?" as though he were chewing on the word. "House-elves are not repaid. House-elves are forever paying."

"Fine – a gift, then," Harry insisted. "I want you and Winky to take a room for your quarters."

Dobby gaped at Harry. "This is Harry Potter's house, not Dobby's or Winky's," he managed after a long pause.

"Pick a room. Fix it to your liking," Harry continued. "You both deserve a proper place of your own. You shouldn't sleep in that hovel off the kitchen."

"But... but... where would Harry Potter's friends stay?" Dobby spluttered.

"Erm... you can move as soon as the Weasleys leave. I'll be at Hogwarts soon, of course," Harry replied unevenly.

Dobby looked uncertain. "Dobby is grateful, but..." he began.

"I'd like to be alone now, if you don't mind," Harry said firmly.

Dobby immediately skittered toward the door. "As you wish, Harry Potter," he said.

Harry struggled with an impulse, and gave into it. "Dobby?"

The house-elf stopped just shy of the door. "Yes, Harry Potter?"

"Would you please send in Ron?" Harry asked. "Just Ron and not his brothers."

Dobby nodded. Ron was obviously waiting near the door, because Dobby quickly pulled him into the room before closing the door.

"How's your shoulder?" Harry asked.

Ron wound around his arm a few times. "Good enough," he said. "Look, mate... I just wanted to say that you made a smashing save. I didn't think any of it through, you know? If you hadn't been able to snatch her... well, Ginny's tiptop and I'm grateful. You should have heard Mum. I think she's ready to mint you your own Order of Merlin medallion."

"How did you make out with her, anyway?" asked Harry. "She was whacking you with a handbag the last that I saw."

Ron grimaced. "The whole thing was pure Mum – hug, then punish, then hug, then punish. We ended on a hug, thank Merlin." He slowly walked around, taking in the fixtures and furnishings, and observed, "This is a very nice room."

Harry sighed. "I suppose you'll be asking me why all the fuss, and that sort of thing?"

Ron came to the armchair, and sat. "No," he said.

Harry was thrown. "I'm sorry?"

"No," repeated Ron. "There's no point. You'll either deflect the question, or throw out a reason that any fool can see through."

"I deserve that," said Harry.

"Damn right," Ron agreed. "Besides, erm... I already know you've been dismissed. I imagine it'll make the Prophet tomorrow."

Harry closed his eyes, and saw the same thing he'd seen for the better part of two days. He blurted out, "I can't get it out of my head. The scream that came out of her, it wasn't even human. All I could do was sit there..." His anger rose simply by talking about it.

Ron said quietly, "If I'd been approached by an Obliviator, I might have taken him up on the offer."

"I want him to suffer like that," Harry seethed. "I want him to feel that pain! I –"

Ron stood up. "That's enough, mate. I don't fancy ending up like the bad end of a brawl."

Harry's throat tightened. "Was I...?"

"Ready to pop off?" Ron asked. "Dunno. You had the same look at Hermione's house, before... you know..."

"Believe me – I know," Harry grumbled.

Ron dismissed him. "Look, Dad was right; they would have killed us all. You had a chance, you took it, they're dead, and that's too bad for them. Any of us would have done the same, given the chance. If you don't see that, it's only because you don't want to look."

"I didn't want to kill," Harry insisted.

"You didn't want Hermione to be killed," Ron countered, "and that won out. I'm capable of killing to save her, or you, or my family. I happily tossed Wormtail off that broom, because he took Ginny. I hope that he's dead."

"It feels so wrong," Harry said.

"I don't think you really care that you killed them. You were out of control, and you didn't like that at all," Ron concluded.

Harry thought about that for a long while, and Ron stayed silent.

“Who are you, and what have you done with the real Ron?” Harry finally asked.

Ron laughed. “He’s on holiday. Maybe it has to do with the brains? Seriously, I think Hermione’s finally rubbed off on me.”

Harry dangled the letter from Sirius. “I don’t want to hold out on you. You have to read this,” he told Ron.

Ron scanned the letter. “Sirius does keep popping up, doesn’t he...? An Earl – is that like a prince, or something...? There was a 60-room castle, and he gave it up? I never understood him... Merlin! Your own beach? This sounds like quite the bachelor flat. I expect Bill would be jealous... no magic? Gods, I don’t know about that...” He slowed down at the last of it, carefully reading the final paragraph. “He understood you, didn’t he? He really understood.”

“It gets better,” Harry said. He found his saddlebags, and pulled out the invitation from Keith MacLeish.

Ron read the front of the card quickly. “Doesn’t he own every wizarding paper in the world, more or less?”

Harry nodded. “You might want to read the other side,” he suggested.

Ron read the handwritten note, and his face beetled into confusion. “Care to explain this?”

“I don’t know. I assume that Diggle sold him the manor that Sirius mentioned in his letter. Somehow, I’ve ended up his business partner as well – Merlin only knows what that means. I’m sure that Remus can help sort it out,” Harry said hopefully.

“Nothing’s ever simple for you, is it?” Ron observed.

Harry surveyed his room. Sirius was right – this house is a mausoleum, he thought. “I have a proposition for you,” he told Ron. “I doubt that it’s a good idea.”

“We’re good at bad ideas, aren’t we?” Ron laughed. “Let’s have it, then.”

“We need to get out of here,” Harry said.

“Brilliant!” Ron agreed. “What did you have in mind – popping down to Diagon Alley, or something?”

“I thought we might pop up to the new house,” Harry explained. “I was thinking about leaving tonight, with a couple of stops along the way. After all, it’s nearly four weeks until you need to catch the Express.”

Ron stared at him, eyes wide and unblinking.

“Ron? Hello? Are you with me, Ron?” Harry asked.

“You’re... you’re asking if I want to... to run off... for the rest of the summer?” Ron stammered.

Harry chuckled. “All right – for a week, then. What do you think?”

Ron deadpanned, “Let me get this right – you want me to take off tonight on a 300 mile jaunt, presumably with no permission and certainly with no protection, to an unfamiliar house in an unfamiliar place, in the company of a known Death Eater magnet?”

Harry said, “That covers it. I figured it would be more like twice that far, though. I’m concerned about Luna, and I think that I should try to see Hermione.”

Ron mulled over Harry’s plan. “Checking on Luna... I suppose that’s a good idea. George is still staying there. Do you, um, think that Hermione’s ready to see you?”

Harry shrugged. "I'm not planning on coming back here, and I imagine she'd never forgive me if I disappear again for a month."

Ron fumed, "It'll be more than a month, mate. I mean, we can see you on Hogsmeade weekends..."

Harry smiled faintly. "Dumbledore has an idea about that. We have to work out the details, but... I'll be close by. You'll see enough of me, I think."

Ron brightened. "There's a bit of good news! An apprenticeship, then?"

Harry's jaw dropped. "Wha... how did...?"

"It's the obvious solution, Harry," Ron shrugged. "It's not as if you'd be packed off to trade school, or left to self-study. No one apprentices anymore, of course – leave it to Harry Potter to be original."

Harry watched Ron's face, to see if he was jesting or being cynical. Satisfied that Ron was simply being Ron, he explained, "Dumbledore managed to get the Board of Governors to offer support for my 'alternative education', or something like that. I think he plans to make them eat their words."

Ron grinned. "Good show. So, you're planning on a few weeks at Sirius' other place, and then back here to catch the Express?"

"I'm not planning on coming back at all," Harry answered. "I can't stay in this house anymore. I'll likely give it to Remus."

"Really?" Ron asked in surprise, adding, "So you'll go straight to Hogwarts from the new house, then?"

Harry said delicately, "Ron... I don't know precisely how this is all going to work. I don't know how the apprenticeship will work. I don't know if I ride the Express. I don't know where I'll be living... Nothing is decided."

Ron frowned. "I hadn't thought... I suppose you wouldn't stay in our dorm anymore, in any case."

"I'm leaving tonight. What do you think?" asked Harry.

"I think we've both gone mad – that's what I think. I'm in," Ron answered. "I don't know if I can afford to travel, though..."

Harry smiled. "You're good for it. You can repay me from your share of the inheritance... unless your Mum and Dad disown you for doing this, in which case you can work it off."

"I hope you can cook something besides Yorkshire pudding," Ron said. "No magic – that's roughing it!"

"See if you can sneak your things up here, later – say, after eleven?" Harry suggested. "I hope that Hermione doesn't throw a fit."

"I know that I wouldn't be upset if you showed up at my window in the middle of the bloody night," Ron wisecracked.

"She'll probably be awake," Harry mused. "I would be."

"It's a good thing Mum and Dad are early sleepers," Ron said. He added by way of explanation, "They're still at the Grangers' house. Dad's been out to the Burrow a few times. I... I guess it's quite bad."

"We'll just have to play it quietly," Harry said.

"If we get to the Grangers' between midnight and one o'clock and spend an hour there... we should make the Lovegoods' before sunrise," Ron calculated. He stopped at the door, and cracked a smile. "Harry... it means a lot to me that you'd think to ask me... look – it means a lot, right?"

Harry took his dinner with Lupin and the three Weasleys. He accepted some of Bill and Fred's praise, and deflected most back to Ron. George had reported that Luna was definitely going to pull

through, according to Fred. Harry was pleased to hear the news, but hadn't realised that her survival had ever been in question; that only increased his certainty about looking in on her. Lupin told him that the Aurors had just missed Lucius Malfoy, and that there was no sign of Wormtail – dead or alive. Lupin seemed almost wary, but Harry counted the days and knew that the werewolf would put his special room to use in a night or two.

Harry retired early. He tried napping, to no avail. Every time that he closed his eyes, he was assaulted by the same memory. He sat on the couch before a flickering fire and began to write a letter for Remus. He crumpled the first three sheets of parchment in disgust. He was in the process of butchering the fourth, when the floor creaked behind him.

“You're a bit early,” Harry said without turning around.

“You'd be referring to the other one planning to sneak out in the night, I believe?” Remus scolded. “Ron's loyal, but not very subtle. I see you're writing a letter. Shall I save you the effort?”

Harry felt his face flush. “I need to get out of here. I hope that you understand.”

“See? That was so much simpler than a letter,” Remus said. “Let's try it a second time. This time, stand up and turn around. The least you can do is speak to me, and not to the floorboards.”

Harry set aside his quill and small stack of parchment. He stood, and nervous shoved his hands into his pockets. “I need to get out of here,” he repeated. “I can't stand being in this house anymore.” He looked into Lupin's eyes, and hastily added, “Not because of you, of course! It's just that I expect to see him around every corner. And now, when I close my eyes... I just know I'll never be able to settle things here.”

Lupin looked at him thoughtfully. “I wondered how long you'd last in this house,” he said. “Even I find it difficult at times, I must admit. Will you want the Trust to dispose of it, then?”

Harry already had an answer. "Sirius promised the Malfoys that they could be safe here, and you need a place to live. I'll sell the house to you for a Galleon, if you want it."

Lupin smiled faintly. "I'll remain a tenant for now. I may find it difficult at times, but you and this house are the last remaining connections to my friends. I have no interest in giving up either connection."

Harry felt his eyes moisten, and he didn't care. Lupin had already seen him break down; there was no point in pretence.

"I'm glad for that," Harry said in a strained voice. "You're all right with my leaving, then?"

Lupin gestured toward Sirius' box. "I am. Dumbledore won't be, but that's between the two of you. Besides, I have a fair idea where you're heading. You'll need this, of course." He withdrew Harry's wand from within his robes, and handed it over. "You left this at the Granger's as well," he added, and produced the framed picture of Hermione.

Harry pocketed the wand, and set aside the picture. "Sirius said you'd been there before," he noted.

For the first time that summer, Harry didn't feel badly at the sight of Lupin's smile. Lupin closed his eyes as the smile spread from ear to ear. "Oh, I've been there. It's beautiful country, in a rough sort of way. We started slipping out during seventh year, you see. It was a little over an hour by broom. We'd drink and tell lies half the night, and then fly back before morning. We were usually half asleep and half pissed; it's a wonder none of us ever flew smack into a tree or a building."

Harry grinned at the image of Sirius and Lupin wildly weaving across the sky. "He said that he lived there for a while, after Hogwarts."

"The bothy was... well, it was what we called a 'pad' back in the 70s. Sirius had, erm, an active social life – very active. Too active for my

liking, I admit... and he had hideous taste in music,” Lupin explained. “Still, I spent a fair bit of time in St. Ebb, especially during the summer following Hogwarts. I imagine the bothy is in serious need of redecorating. It was very ‘in’ at the time, but styles have certainly changed over the years.”

“What about Ron, then?” Harry asked apprehensively.

“I suggest that he informs his parents by morning,” Lupin answered. “When Bill and Fred find his room empty, they’ll ask and I’ll have to answer. Ride carefully, the both of you – be sure to wear the helmets!”

“Remus...?” Harry called just before Lupin reached the door.

“What is it?” Lupin asked.

Harry struggled to say, “I just wanted to say... I know you didn’t want to be a father... but this week...”

“I’m glad that I could be there for you,” said Lupin.

“Will you still be there?” Harry asked.

Lupin smiled. “For as long as you like,” he said. “Let me know that you’re safe, from time to time.” He quickly left the room.

Harry loaded his trunk with books and clothes and effects and his two brooms, and reduced it. He walked quietly down the stairs to the cellar, and packed away his weights and bags. With the two cases reduced and dropped into his saddlebag next to his trunk, he headed back up the stairs and into the kitchen. He thought that he spotted Dobby peeking out from the pantry; if so, the house-elf didn’t venture out. He nearly ran into Ron.

“Ready?” he asked.

Ron swallowed a mouthful of cookie, and held up a small athletic bag. “Not much to take along,” he said.

Harry reduced the bag, and dropped it into his saddlebags. At the front door, he enlarged both helmets and offered one to Ron.

Ron's Nimbus racer was propped next to the door. "I'll ride this, if it's all the same," Ron said.

"We can talk if you wear the helmet," Harry pointed out. "Probably safer that way, right?"

Ron nodded, and slipped on the helmet. Harry enlarged the Bonneville, and they headed toward Winchester and the Grangers' house.

Chapter Eighteen

THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Harry stood on Hermione's roof and balanced against the dormer while Ron continued to tap lightly on her window. He could vaguely hear music, and he could see two figures through the pulled sheers, one in bed and one in a chair. There was movement. Someone stopped just behind the sheers, and looked cautiously through them.

“Any sign of her?” Harry asked.

Ron grimaced at him. “It’s just Ginny. Can’t you hear the bloody violin?” he said, much more loudly than Harry liked. He shook his head, rapped hard on the window, and said in full voice, “Oy, Hermione!”

Harry shushed Ron, who waved him off just as Hermione raised the sheers. She stood there in a dressing gown, hands on hips. After she shook her head at Ron for a long while, she opened the window.

“Ron Weasley, you are a complete nutter,” she said. “Get in here before you fall off the roof.”

“I brought a friend – do you mind?” Ron asked.

“Is it Lavender Brown?” Hermione snapped.

Ron harrumphed. “You’re not starting on that, are you? Perhaps we should leave...?”

“Get in here, before we wake the entire house – and the neighbourhood in the bargain,” said Hermione. As Ron clambered through the window, she added hesitantly, “You too, Harry.”

Harry clambered around from the side of the dormer. Hermione had walked away from the window, and he watched her for a moment. Her arms were crossed rather too tightly. She jumped at the sound of his feet landing against the bedroom floor, but didn’t turn to face him.

Ginny sat in a rocking chair in the far corner, clad in light jumper and denims, violin in hand. She gave a tired wave. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever show up here," she croaked. The strain showed on her face; Wormtail had obviously squeezed harder than Harry had ever imagined.

Harry looked to Ron, and spluttered, "Wha... did you...?"

Ron shook his head fervently. "Not a word, mate, not a word." He gave Harry a nudge. "Are you going to cast some silencing charms, then, or do we just stare at each other all night?"

Harry withdrew his wand, and blanketed the room.

Hermione looked at a clock hung on the wall. "It's a quarter to one. I can't believe Professor Lupin let you do this."

"He didn't exactly let us," Ron said proudly. "We're on the lam."

Hermione looked at Ron blankly for a moment, and then her eyes bugged. "You're what?"

"On the lam – newly escaped," Ron chuckled. "We'd had enough of Azkaban, so I thought I'd break Harry free, and –"

Hermione gasped sharply. "Don't you... don't even joke about that, Ron! It's not funny, not at all!"

Ron fidgeted. "Erm... right, I won't joke about escaping. I didn't mean to wind you up..."

Hermione lit into him. "Your parents are sleeping two rooms away, and your sister's sitting a few feet away. Strange choice of destination for a jailbreak, isn't it?"

"I'm not returning to Grimmauld Place," Harry said. "I thought you should know before I left. I didn't want –"

Hermione fumed. "Didn't want what, Harry? Didn't want me to worry? Didn't want to give me a fright? It's a bit late on both counts!"

Harry frowned. "This was a mistake. I'm sorry to trouble you." He started for the window.

Hermione said quickly, "I didn't ask you to leave."

"You didn't ask me to stay, either," Harry snapped. The rest rushed out of him. "I'm sorry I frightened you so badly. Should I have just sat there? Is that what you wanted? Did you want to die?"

"You're out of line, Harry," Ron warned.

Harry glared at him. "Stay out of this."

Ron stepped between Harry and Hermione. He sneered, "What are you going to do about it, Harry – are you going to hit me?" Hermione covered her mouth with her hands, and she shook.

Harry felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him. "I don't want to fight with either of you. Hermione, I disappeared on you once this summer, and I didn't want to do it twice. I just wanted to see that you were all right, before I left. I should go. Ron, come or stay – whatever." He started for the window a second time.

"I'm not all right," Hermione said. "I... I don't know if... if I'll ever be all right." Harry turned and moved toward her, but she waved him off. Her jaw twitched, and her face coursed with a rush of pain and anger.

She shouted, "You don't know what he did! You don't know what he took from me! He took everything!" Tears ran down her face. Harry moved closer, and she waved him off again.

"I might know more than you think," Harry said. "He's been running around in my head for five years. I wanted to stop him, but I didn't know how. You don't know how it felt to watch... what they were doing to you... it was... it was..." He closed his eyes, and fought back the images.

“It was the most awful thing he’s ever seen,” Ron said. “I know, because I felt the same way. I wanted to kill all of them for hurting you. I didn’t know that Harry could actually do it.”

“Harry... I...” Hermione began.

His reserve broke. He took her hand, and tried to draw her to him, but she whipped her hand free.

“Dumbledore was right to curse me; I was the weak link... I was weak!” she cried. “And when I saw you... there was so much... so much blood, and I – I – I just couldn’t... I couldn’t understand how... I was on my knees and he was... he wouldn’t stop, and I couldn’t... and you were watching, and – and then you were... you were choking him, and then the blood, it was everywhere – I never thought... I don’t know what I expected... it was exactly like he... oh God, I’m so sorry...” She cried until she shook. Harry stood there, and felt as useless as he’d ever felt.

After a time, she looked up at him with red face and dampened eyes, and then quickly looked away. He said quietly, “You were right to be afraid; I’m afraid of myself. I don’t know how I’m doing any of these things. When we were chasing Wormtail, I summoned Ginny.” He looked to Ginny. “I summoned you! I don’t know what’s happening to me.” Ginny’s eyes moistened.

Hermione wiped at her eyes with the backs of her hands. “It... it has to be good, right? Somehow this has to be good. Maybe... maybe this will help you to defeat Voldemort. We’ll figure it out somehow, Harry.” She looked to Ron. “We’ll figure it out together.”

“I’m back on your good side, then?” Ron asked.

Tears still trailed from Hermione’s eyes. “It’s a wonder you’re alive, and on anyone’s side,” she sniffed. “What on Earth were you thinking?” Ginny snorted at that.

“About halfway down, I was thinking that this wasn’t the smartest thing I’d ever done,” Ron said seriously.

Hermione managed to look reproachful. “So, you thought you’d compound that by running off in the middle of the night – clever.”

Ron frowned. “Harry asked, and I said yes. I’ve done enough crying and moping for a lifetime this summer. A lot of things seem clearer now. I’m willing to fight for my friends and my family, and I’m willing to die for them. I would rather have been splattered against the ground than let that monster Wormtail make off with my sister. I would rather have died fighting than let you be killed. Harry asked me, and that’s worth a bit of heat from Mum and Dad.”

Hermione fumbled for a tissue. “You would have died for me?” she asked quietly.

“Without a second thought,” Ron insisted. “So would Harry. For Merlin’s sake, he charged half a dozen Death Eaters with his bare hands! You were ready to be killed rather than give up on Harry. I’d like to think you would have done the same for me. We really are friends to the end, right?”

Hermione looked to Harry, who shrugged. “I’ve already asked who he is, and what he’s done with Ron,” he said. Ron grinned at them both.

“Where do you go from here, then?” Hermione asked.

“I thought that we should look in on Luna,” Harry said.

Hermione lowered her eyes. “Ginny’s been communicating with George. I feel... I haven’t treated her the way that she deserves to be treated. Don’t misunderstand – I certainly haven’t been like the Ravenclaws, stealing her things and the like. I’ve mocked her, though. I’ve treated her as poorly as everyone has. I hope that she’d be open to an apology on my part.”

Ron sighed. "I was cruel to her, the last time that she talked to me. She was trying to be nice to me, and I was really cruel. At least you've been decent to her, Harry."

"If she hadn't sent that note, we would have been caught surprised by the Death Eaters," Hermione observed. "I expect that they would have killed everyone immediately, except for Harry and me." She looked to Ginny. "You've always known Luna for who she really is, haven't you?"

"All anyone had to do was talk to her," Ginny said with effort.

"It was a good thing she was drawn into the dream, wasn't it? She recognised what was happening, when we didn't," Harry said.

"Harry, about the dream..." Hermione began.

"I'm fine with it," Harry said hastily. "Are you?"

"No," Hermione said firmly. Harry's stomach rumbled and he tried to maintain a neutral expression.

Ron jumped in, to Harry's delight. "Much as I hate to break this up, Harry, do you want to make Ottery St. Catchpole before sunrise?"

Ginny stood and put her violin in its case. "Been fancying a ride on that Nimbus," Ginny croaked. "Better company this time."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "What in the devil are you talking about?"

"Coming with you," Ginny managed, "or should I bang on Mum's door?"

"Why do you want to come?" Ron demanded, in the tone that older brothers reserve for younger sisters who tag along. Hermione frowned at him.

"To see my friend," Ginny said.

Ron sighed. "Can't argue with that, I suppose."

Hermione summoned her most determined look – the look that warned Harry and Ron against any argument. "I'm coming with you," she repeated, "as far as Luna's. I want to make things right. It's the least I can do. I just need a minute to pull myself together. Wait outside, would you? Go on – shoo!" She herded them to the window, nudged both Harry and Ron out, closed the window, and drew the heavy drapes.

Five minutes later, Ginny leant out the window. She looked to be very much on edge, Harry thought. "We'll meet you on the patio," she said.

Harry set down the Bonnie next to the high-backed benches. He looked warily at the shadows that draped most of the yard. Reflected moonlight glinted off the grass, and for a moment Harry thought he saw bloody streaks beneath the tree. Ridiculous, he assured himself, the people from the Ministry would never have let that by.

Ginny came out first, in a heavier jumper and a raincoat. Hermione had also changed into a heavy jumper and denims, as well as a heavy waistcoat – a lesson learned from the last motorbike ride, Harry presumed. Harry took their small travelling bags, reduced them, and dropped them into his saddlebag. Ginny had attached a long strap to the violin case; it was slung over one shoulder and across her body.

Hermione looked hesitantly at the Bonnie. "Erm... maybe I should take a broom. You have yours here, Ginny – don't you?"

"A broom? Have you gone 'round the twist?" Ron gasped. "You couldn't manage Ginny's broom three hundred yards, let alone three hundred miles! Just get on the back of the motorbike, and... oh."

Sweet Merlin – even RON caught it, Harry thought as he looked into Hermione's eyes and his stomach sank. It was painfully obvious that her problem was not with the motorbike but with its owner.

Harry took out his trunk, enlarged it, brought out his Nimbus, and repacked the saddlebags. He forced a smile and told Ginny, "You take Hermione on the Bonnie, and I'll ride this."

Ginny's eyes were saucers. "I don't know... I mean, it's really fast, and... do you think I can...?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, I think you can handle it. It's really quite simple, and I know you won't overdo it with Hermione riding pillion – will you?"

Ginny quickly shook her head. "No, no, of course not! Gods, Fred and George will have kittens when I tell them!"

Ron quickly handed his helmet to Hermione. "The two of you should have these," he offered.

"Thank you," she said quietly. She looked to Harry, "I'm sorry..."

"So am I," Harry returned. He quickly gave the permission incantation that would allow Ginny to ride without him.

Ron smirked, "Let's get on our way, before Hermione has a fit and leaves a note or something."

"Oh, I already did that," Hermione said. "Short and to the point – 'Mother and Dad: Ginny and I left with Harry and Ron. Be back soon. Love, Hermione.' I slid it under their door."

"You didn't... you did!" shrieked Ron. He nearly dove onto his broom, and shoved off hard from the patio. Hermione took the pillion position on the Bonneville, and Harry lagged behind to be sure that Ginny could manage.

It was a long ride, made longer by the lateness of the hour. They flew as high as the last time that Ron and Harry had flown, and Harry wondered if that had occurred to Ron. Ron flew close to Harry, and proceeded to sing at the top of his lungs. Even Harry knew he was terribly off-key, and the singing lost its novelty very quickly. It might

have been different if the songs were familiar; Harry didn't recognize a single one. Maybe he is singing well, if it's wizarding music, he thought.

Hermione sat far back from Ginny, at first. After an hour or so, Harry noticed that she was slumping forward a bit; Harry wondered if it was out of fatigue, or simply for need of a windbreak. A few minutes later, he saw her trembling.

He hollered to Ron, "We need to set down for a bit. Let's make for that roadway." Ron darted to one side until he was inches from Ginny, flashed her some rapid-fire hand signals, and then shot toward the earth.

Ron and Harry came to the ground behind some trees adjacent to the narrow country lane. Ginny set down, and pulled to a stop on the shoulder. Hermione was obviously exhausted and very windblown.

Harry swung around to face her. "Are you all right? We'll stop here a while, if you like."

She pulled off her helmet, squinted at him, and made futile attempts to brush her hair back. "I wasn't prepared for the wind," she sniffled.

"Is that all?" Harry asked cautiously, hopeful of avoiding open wounds.

"I'm just so tired," Hermione yawned.

Harry didn't believe that was all, but doubted that he was prepared to hear the truth – whatever that might be. "You probably should have stayed behind," he said, "but I'm glad that you're here."

Ron stepped out from the trees. He held his helmet in one hand. After a cautious look up and down the lane, he crept to the motorbike. "Hermione, you look a mess!" he exclaimed.

"Ron, you're a prat," she shot back.

“She does have a point,” Harry offered.

Ron snorted. “There you go, taking her side. Some things never change, eh?”

Hermione managed a weary smile. “It warms my heart to hear the two of you bickering.”

Ron crossed his arms and shuddered. “It’s bracing up there, isn’t it? I admit it, though – I sort of like the wind whipping at me.”

“Good thing, now that you’ve taken up skydiving,” Harry retorted. “I wish you hadn’t taken up singing.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “You were singing?” she asked Ron.

“Like an angel,” Ron insisted. “I could be on the WWN.”

“Precisely the problem,” Harry grumbled.

“You weren’t singing, were you?” Hermione asked Harry.

“Not a chance; I couldn’t possibly compete with Ron,” Harry answered.

“You don’t want to switch to a broom, do you – maybe ride with Ron?” Ginny asked Hermione.

“I... I feel more secure where I am,” Hermione said.

Ginny said, “Look, the bike is smashing, but it’s not an easy ride. Harry, I’m sorry but I have to switch off. Hermione...”

“It’s fine,” Hermione whispered. Harry reluctantly mounted the bike, and even more reluctantly put on the helmet.

“The Lovegoods live in the village, on the green,” Ron said to Harry. “I’ll set down in the gardens; it’s a short walk for us from there. You

two can ride in, I suppose. Look for the Quibbler sign, and we'll meet you there." He looked around carefully once more, and sat atop his Nimbus. Ginny settled in on Harry's broom, and impulsively shouted, "Race you!" She quickly climbed away and disappeared. Ron shrugged and tore off after her.

Hermione latched onto Harry tightly. Harry said, "I won't put you through that," and slowly drifted up into the dark and clear night.

"Thank you," she said, so quiet that he could barely hear.

"Ginny should know better," Harry said.

There was a lengthy pause, before Hermione said, "That's not what I meant."

"You're welcome," Harry offered, hoping to forestall the inevitable. It seemed to work, because she nestled into him and her breathing became slow and even. Harry rode at a gentle speed and took no chances. He made no effort to rouse her until they were rolling along the carriageway into Ottery St. Catchpole.

"Hermione? Hermione, do you hear me?" Harry said.

"Unnh...wha... erm, must have dozed off," Hermione murmured. She yawned, and asked, "Where are we?"

"The village is just beyond the next rise," Harry said. "How do you feel?"

"Horrible," Hermione admitted. "You?"

Harry blinked hard. He was sore, and his eyes were tired. "I'm holding up. It's good that we're arriving soon."

Ottery St. Catchpole was silent and empty at half past four in the morning. The shop fronts surrounding the village green were all dark, except for two – a bakery and The Quibbler. The front door opened, and Ron peered out as they pulled up. Rather than risk being seen

reducing the motorbike, Harry used the Unbreakable Chain and Lock to lash it to a light post, and took the saddlebags with him.

The front room of the shop was dominated by an enormous piece of noisy, churning machinery. Most of the rest of the room was empty, except for a few shelves cluttered with stacks of papers and small boxes, a rack of tools and other curiosities, several enormous rolls of newsprint, and a modest pile of debris pushed into one corner. Harry saw a pair of feet jutting from beneath the machine.

Ron wore a heavy apron over his clothes, and his hands were streaked black with oil. He called out, "Mr. Lovegood, they're here!"

There was a clunk! followed by loud cursing. Mr. Lovegood slid from beneath the machine and descended upon them in a flurry of handshakes, flecks of oil spattering everywhere. He wore grease-stained coveralls and a dark cap with a bill on the front, emblazoned with a stylised N and Y stitched in white. Gauze wrapping stuck out from beneath the cap, and Harry remembered something about a head wound. "Harry! What a great pleasure! And you must be Hermione Granger – Luna speaks fondly of you. I'm Oddment Lovegood. People call me Odd."

"Is that so?" Hermione said with a faint grin.

"Erm, what is that thing?" Harry asked, pointing at the clanking machine.

Mr. Lovegood wiped his hands on a towel. Harry couldn't see the point – the towel was as dirty as his hands. "It's a printing press, of course. It was a little dodgy before, but thanks to those Death Eater bastards... pardon the language. It's funny how things work out, you know? If Ron hadn't come along tonight, I'd have had no chance of getting this week's Quibbler out. Everyone's been wonderful, really. George Weasley's been looking after Luna for two days, and Rita Skeeter helped with the typesetting..."

"How can you be in the open this way?" Hermione asked. "Hasn't the Ministry confronted you?"

Mr. Lovegood appeared puzzled. “Whatever for? The Quibbler is England’s leading weekly for the dog show trade.”

Harry spluttered, “Excuse me?”

“The dog show trade,” Mr. Lovegood repeated. “The Quibbler produces a perfectly respectable weekly paper for people who show dogs. I also print handbills, signs, brochures, and invitations – whatever is needed, more or less. As for the rest... let’s just say that an understanding was reached.”

Hermione cleared her throat, and said uncertainly, “May I ask, sir... why?”

“Why live among Muggles, or why dog shows?” Mr. Lovegood asked.

Hermione giggled, taking Harry completely by surprise. “Both, I suppose,” she said.

Mr. Lovegood answered, “To the first, I find that I prefer the company – though I’m happy to have all of you here, of course. To the second... I like dogs.”

Ron picked up one of the newsprint rolls. “Are we ready, then?”

Mr. Lovegood barked instructions. “Hoist it up there just like I showed you, Ron. Mind the feeders... remember to keep your fingers back... I don’t want to trouble Pomfrey again... that’s it. Now pull the blue lever – perfect – and set the valves. You remember the rest?”

“Cross my fingers and cover my head?” Ron confirmed.

“After you drop the switch, of course,” Mr. Lovegood said.

Ron grasped a large handle and pulled downward; Harry saw that Ron had indeed crossed the fingers of his other hand. Everyone took several steps back as the large machine shook and shuddered and

filled the room with pops and clunks and squeaks. After a few anxious minutes – and a few strategic swings with a large wrench on Mr. Lovegood's part – printed papers began appearing at the far end of the press.

"Success!" Mr. Lovegood cried out. He dashed over to Ron and clapped him on the back. "You have the touch, my boy!"

Ron beamed. "My dad will be so jealous," he said.

Mr. Lovegood grinned sheepishly. "You know... your dad's been up a time or two to poke about. He... well... he lacks a certain grasp when it comes to Muggle machinery. He means well, of course."

The glass panes of the front door banged and rattled. An owl was battering the door.

Mr. Lovegood fished out a pair of small wire-rimmed glasses. They reminded Harry of the glasses Sirius wore when he recorded his will. "Ah, that must be the Prophet. Shall we sample the competition, then?"

He opened the door, paid the owl, and held up the rolled newspaper. He held it up to his line of sight, peered down the length, and then rocked it in one hand as though he were weighing it. "Cutting costs already, I see. Feel the thinner paper? The ink smudges to the touch, as well," he said. He sniffed his fingertips, and continued, "Plant-based ink, probably soy. They're obviously using commercial presses. I'll wager they're running it along with the Daily Mirror. Shall we?"

Harry, Hermione and Ron all huddled around as Mr. Lovegood unfurled the Daily Prophet atop a cluttered worktable.

"This new format must be sending some of the society crowd to their graves," Mr. Lovegood said; he added under his breath, "Good riddance."

The Daily Prophet had always reminded Harry of the daily that Uncle Vernon read each morning – very formal, very small print, very few

pictures. The paper before them was a very colourful tabloid. It took a moment for the headlines to sink in, at which time Harry contemplated whether he should faint or explode.

‘BLOODY HARRY’ DISMISSED FROM HOGWARTS! the enormous headline screamed. It was positioned over the top of a half-page photo of Harry, apparently taken shortly after he and Ron had rescued Ginny. He looked windblown and angry. In one corner was an inset box, which read:

EXTRA COVERAGE INSIDE:

- * Fudge’s flip-flops – a sign of rough political waters ahead?
- * Aurors goggle over Potter pal Ron Weasley’s daring ‘Death Drop’
- * Does the daring daylight assault signal a new wave of Death Eater activity?

Ron grinned from ear to ear. “Do you see that? I made the Aurors goggle,” he said proudly.

Hermione looked at Harry, her eyes wide. “Dismissed? You were dismissed? Why didn’t you say anything? I can’t believe that Professor Dumbledore would ever –”

“He didn’t,” Harry said flatly. “The Board of Governors ordered him to toss me out.”

Hermione erupted. “But they can’t! We’ll fight this, Harry. A well-calculated campaign can rouse public opinion! They’ll regret this!”

“Dumbledore has a plan,” Harry said. “Everything will work out, I promise.”

Ron added, “Don’t get your knickers in a twist, Hermione. He’ll be there in the fall.” Hermione threw the Daily Prophet at him.

Mr. Lovegood grunted. He snatched a copy of the Quibbler from the end of the press, and set it next to the Prophet. "And now for something completely different," he said smugly.

The Quibbler's headline read VOLDEMORT'S ATTACK FOILED; POTTER DISMISSED, with a subheading that said, "At least 7 Death Eaters killed in attack on prominent Muggle-born student; Potter rewarded for bravery with dismissal from Hogwarts". The lead article, under Rita Skeeter's by-line, was entitled "Harry Potter's Dark Day... In His Own Words". The headline below the fold read "Fudge Attacks Potter for Fighting Death Eaters, Insults Muggle-borns". On page two, a large article was entitled "For Love of a Sister: Why Ron Weasley Took the Death Drop", which was also under Skeeter's by-line. Ron smiled at the sight of that headline, and Harry wondered why Ron had decided to talk to Skeeter. Below that, Odd Lovegood's own column asked, "Does Voldemort control the Hogwarts Board of Governors?" On page three were articles about nargle infestation and a Stubby Boardman sighting in Greater Hangleton – curiously, Harry found that they lifted his spirits a bit.

Hermione said, "I have to admit that the Quibbler is clearly the better paper."

Ron flipped back to the front page. "I can't believe you printed his name," he said, seemingly in awe.

Mr. Lovegood said sternly, "If my daughter can say it, why can't grown wizards and witches do the same? Every time we print 'You-Know-Who' or 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named', we lend him power. If his name is Voldemort, then I intend to use it."

Harry said darkly, "His name is Tom Riddle, not Voldemort – and certainly not Lord Voldemort."

Mr. Lovegood asked excitedly, "Did you say 'Tom Riddle'?" He pulled a battered and chewed pencil from his coveralls, and scribbled on the front of the freshly printed Quibbler.

"There's something that you have over him, Harry," Ron laughed. "Now he's messing with a real Lord."

Hermione didn't seem to hear Ron over the clatter of the press, but Mr. Lovegood did. "Rita told me about that – congratulations, milord," he said, and bowed with a mock flourish. Hermione looked up abruptly.

"It's not mentioned in here, is it?" Harry asked.

Mr. Lovegood answered, "We agreed to hold that aside. She felt that we should wait until the end of September, for some reason."

Hermione shouted over the din, "What in Merlin's name are you going on about? What do you mean, 'milord'?"

Harry went to his saddlebags, which he had set by the door. He found the letter from Sirius and the note from MacLeish, and thrust them into Hermione's hands. She began with the letter. Her lip quivered as she read it, and Harry couldn't fathom why. She quickly read both sides of the note, and her brow wrinkled in confusion.

Harry waited and waited. "I wasn't trying to hide it from you. Say something, please?" he finally said.

"She insisted on seeing who was down here," Ginny croaked from the stairs. "I could use some help here!"

"I knew that I heard talking," Luna called out in a very weak voice.

"Luna! Gods, you shouldn't be up and about!" Mr. Lovegood exclaimed.

Luna saw Harry, Ron and Hermione, and said calmly, "This is an unexpected pleasure," just as she lurched to one side and draped against Ginny. Hermione dropped the letter and the note, and rushed up the stairs.

There was no question that Luna had been badly hurt. Her lower lip was split, and her left cheek deeply bruised. She had two severe black eyes. She stood awkwardly, leant slightly to one side; Harry

wondered if her ribs had been cracked or broken. He chose not to imagine the state she'd been in before Madam Pomfrey had seen her. At some point, she had cut her hair very short; the mix of dirty blond and lighter coloured tips looked like something Tonks would favour.

Hermione said firmly, "You're bleeding. We need to help you back up the stairs."

Luna attempted to turn around on her own, and wobbled dangerously. Hermione caught her at the shoulders, and ordered, "You just mind your feet. I'll steady you from this side, and Ginny has the other side."

Luna acquiesced but said nothing. Ron and Harry started up the stairs, but Hermione commanded, "Wait downstairs – we'll need a few minutes to change these dressings."

"Can I get you anything?" Ron called to Luna. "Some juice, something to eat?"

"Apology accepted," Luna said without turning back. Ron looked at her strangely, but said nothing. The press let out a terrible grinding sound, and Mr. Lovegood whacked it soundly with his wrench.

Hermione fetched Ron and Harry fifteen minutes later. She stopped them at the top of the stairs. "She's very tired. She wants to see you both, though I'd prefer it if she'd just sleep. I... I contacted Madam Pomfrey. There are half a dozen potions, and I wanted to get them straight. I thought about waking George, but he's surely exhausted. Luna definitely shouldn't have survived. Madam Pomfrey kept her here for fear of Flooing her to Hogwarts."

"Why not call St. Mungo's?" Harry asked. "Surely they know how to deal with that sort of thing."

"Mr. Lovegood wouldn't allow it," Hermione frowned. "He has issues with St. Mungo's, apparently."

"Is she going to get well?" Ron asked nervously.

Hermione answered, "Madam Pomfrey insists that the worst is past. I'm presuming, however, that neither of you will talk her to death. Five minutes, understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ron said, and Hermione groaned.

The door at the top of the stairs opened into a cluttered open room with a small kitchen, a hearth, and a sitting area. There was a narrow hallway off the end of the room. Luna lay on the couch, heavily propped with pillows. The table before the couch was strewn with books. Ginny sat on a wooden dining chair. She played a slow, gentle tune on her violin, and Luna smiled with one side of her mouth.

Luna saw them standing there, and turned. Ginny stopped playing. "Hello, Harry. Hello, Ronald. I'm pleased to see that you're both intact," Luna said matter-of-factly. There was an odd sort of rattle to her voice.

Ron cringed at the sound of his given name. He knelt before the couch, and awkwardly took Luna's hand. "I'm sorry to see you like this. Does it hurt?"

Luna rolled her eyes. "Only when you state the obvious," she said.

Ron grimaced. "Quite a lot, then."

Luna started to laugh, but coughed instead and winced. "I'd take that juice now, if you're so inclined," she told Ron. Ron rose, and Harry took his place.

Harry could scarcely look at her. He felt sad and guilty and angrier by the moment. "Why?" he asked. "Why would anyone do this to another...?" Visions of six dead Death Eaters ran through his mind, and he couldn't finish asking the question.

Luna answered, "Because this is what they do... who knows, really? Why does it matter?"

“You’re my friend,” Harry said. “I’m tired of my friends being hurt because of me.”

“As far as I am aware, the solar system rotates around the sun – not around Harry Potter,” Luna chided him. “Sometimes we see things, and sometimes we become caught up in events, but in the end we all choose our fate.”

Harry stiffened. “I wish that were true.”

“You know the prophecy, then,” Luna said.

“Wha... how could...?” Harry spluttered.

Luna explained. “It’s a logical conclusion, given the events of the last few weeks as I understand them. Based upon your reaction just now, I presume that I’m correct.” Hermione smiled at her.

“You deserve to know,” Harry said. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Only if you wish to share the knowledge,” Luna answered. “I take it that Hermione, Ginny and Ronald have already heard?”

Ron brought a glass of pumpkin juice. “Telling the prophecy, are you?”

“Yes,” said Harry.

Ron handed Luna the glass. “Good,” he said. “I’d say she’s earned the right to hear it.”

Harry waited until she sipped and swallowed, imagining the pain that a choking fit might cause. He took the glass, set it on the table, and recited the prophecy. Luna pursed her lips while he spoke.

When he finished, she nodded, and said, “That explains rather a lot, doesn’t it?”

Harry goggled at her. “That’s it? Nothing more?”

“Not at the moment,” Luna said. “Thank you for telling me, Harry – your confidence in me is appreciated... is that why you all came here?”

“I really believed that it was just a dream,” Harry said. “If you hadn’t sent that note -”

“There were at least fifteen of them. If they’d surprised us...” Ron added.

“The rest of us would be dead, and Voldemort would have Harry,” Hermione summed up.

“I’m your friend,” Ginny croaked. “Friends look after one another. You certainly did that for us.”

Luna blushed slightly, and fiddled with a chain of butterbeer caps resting in her hands. “You should be thanking Ronald’s brothers. I don’t know how Alfred understood what I was trying to tell him – thank Merlin that he did. I couldn’t really speak; George had to use one of those amusing candies of theirs to hold my throat closed.” Harry hadn’t noticed the heavy dressings around Luna’s throat.

Ron paled, but demanded, “I want to know everything about the attack. How many were there? Did you recognize any of them? And where in the bloody hell are the Aurors, anyway? Why is there no protection here?”

Luna shrank slightly into the pillows. “There were three of them; two men who I didn’t recognise and Bellatrix Lestrange.” Harry’s temples throbbed at the name.

She went on, “Daddy never stood a chance. He was leant over the press when they came in. They stunned him and he cut his head on the machinery. I went for my wand, and stunned both of the men before I was disarmed. Lestrange said that she was going to enjoy punishing me. She said that she was going to make me pay for casting my lot with all of you.”

With a ferocity that Harry would never have associated with Luna Lovegood, she added, "I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. She tore at me with curses, and I wouldn't cry out. She put me in a body bind and beat me, and I wouldn't give in to her. So she did this." Her fingers traced the dressings around her neck.

"It must have been iugulo," Harry seethed. "I ran across it in one of the books at Grimmauld Place." Luna nodded slowly.

Hermione moved in next to Harry, and put her hand on Luna's shoulder. "It's a miracle that you didn't bleed out entirely," she said. Ginny sat silently, deathly pale.

"Where are the Aurors?" Ron repeated.

"Daddy didn't want the Ministry involved," Luna said. "Professor Dumbledore was here with Madam Pomfrey. That fellow with the gold earring – Shacklebolt? – he was here for a time. Then Professor Lupin came, and they left. Professor Flitwick was here for a long while, I think. The next thing I remember clearly was Rita Skeeter talking to Daddy. That's how we found out what had happened with Harry and Voldemort... and Ronald's impulsiveness, of course."

Harry said, "Luna, you're going to... you're going to hear things about me, about what I did. I hope that you don't –"

Luna had closed her eyes, and settled deeply into the pillows. She firmly cut him off. "I know that you've been dismissed. I know that they're wrong and you're right. Some of them are fools, and some others are simply evil. There are too many fools, and too many evil people, aren't there? Remember this, Harry – no one who matters will ever stand against you." Harry squeezed her hand firmly, and swallowed hard.

Hermione said, "You need to rest. I'll be here when you wake, I promise. You're one of us now, Luna. Like it or not, you're one of us. We won't leave you alone again – someone will always be here for you."

“I’m here to stay, obviously,” Ginny added. “It’s time that we spell George.”

“There’s no need to overcompensate, but I appreciate the company,” Luna said quietly. She opened her eyes, and looked at Hermione. “When you told me that Harry and Ronald were running off, I assumed that you were going with them.”

“I told them I was coming here,” Hermione said.

“What do you think, Ron? Catch a nap here, and then move on?” Harry asked.

“Erm... we need to talk,” Ron said, and he headed for the stairs.

By the time Harry and Ron reached the print shop below, Ron was positively fidgeting.

“I’m not forcing you to go,” Harry said.

“I’ll feel guilty standing you up, but I’ll feel guiltier standing up my family. We flew over the Burrow, on our way into the village,” Ron explained. “I don’t know what we’re going to do, Harry. I knew it was bad, but to actually see it... Mum and Dad are going to need all of us, I think.”

“I could stay, if it would help,” Harry asked.

Ron shook his head. “You should go,” he said.

Harry sighed. “Will you come up, before the summer’s out?”

“Send an owl in a week or two and I’m as good as there, mate,” Ron promised. “You are going to catch some sleep first, aren’t you? I’m about ready to drop, myself.” Despite that, Ron set to helping Mr. Lovegood again.

Harry sat quietly on the stairs for a long while, before he climbed the stairs to peek into the living area. Luna was asleep on the couch. She looked more peaceful than Harry would have expected; she seemed so small and fragile, but she was stronger than he ever could have imagined. Hermione was asleep in an adjacent chair. Her brow was furrowed and she was stirring, but seemed asleep. Harry knew that Hermione was happiest when there was a purpose or a cause at hand; Luna would provide her with that for a time, provided that Hermione didn't drive her mad first. He hoped that Ginny might be able to keep the peace, if it came to that. He hoped that Hermione would stop hurting. He sat in the chair next to Hermione at half past five, and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

August 7, 1996

It was a quarter past nine. Both the flat above and the shop below were quiet. Ron was asleep on the floor beside the couch. Luna and Hermione were still asleep as well, and Harry assumed that Mr. Lovegood was in his bedroom. The door to the second bedroom was cracked, and Harry saw George lying face down on Luna's bed. He made his way down the stairs.

Ginny sat on the bottom step. "Good morning," she said. There were dark circles under her eyes. The violin case was in her lap.

"Did you get any sleep at all?" he asked.

"A little," she answered.

"Liar," Harry teased. Her eyes widened, and she appeared hurt. "I didn't mean it that way," he quickly added.

"You're ready to leave. Don't let me stand in your way," she said morosely.

Harry sat next to her. "How long has it been since you've had a full night's sleep?" he asked.

Ginny clasped her hands together and stretched her arms. "Sometime in June, I suppose," she answered under her breath.

"Smashing summer, isn't it?" Harry observed. "Look... the other night... I'm just glad I got to you in time."

"You should have let me fall," Ginny said, her eyes fixed on the violin case.

Harry felt a nervous chill run through him. "You don't mean that," he insisted, but part of him suddenly suspected what was wrong.

"Voldemort got at us through me, didn't he?" Ginny asked.

Harry desperately wanted to tell her that it was impossible, that she was certainly free of Riddle, that he and only he was responsible for letting Voldemort in. He couldn't. "I don't know," he answered.

"What if it's me?" she whispered. "Wormtail said that... he said I was to be spared. Why would Voldemort spare me?"

"He told me it was in payment for services rendered," Harry admitted to her, his voice choking on the words. "I assume he was talking about what happened in the Chamber of Secrets."

Ginny began to cry. Harry sat beside her, and wrapped an arm around her as a brother would. She leant into him and held him in a way that she would never hold one of her brothers. He didn't know what to do, but he didn't push her away.

"I just sat here so that I could say good-bye," she sobbed. "I know that I need to stay away from you, as far away as I can manage. I... I shouldn't know anything... I can't be told anything." She pulled away from him, wiped at her face, and added fiercely, "Do you understand? Not anything!"

Harry brushed her bangs away from her eyes, and wiped away a streaking tear. "Last year, you told me what it felt like to be

possessed by him. Do you feel as though you've been possessed again?" he asked.

She hesitated, and her jaw worked from side to side as she contemplated. "No... no, I haven't felt that. I haven't felt like myself, either. Sometimes... sometimes it feels like someone else is looking through my eyes. Have you ever felt that?"

Harry said carefully, "I've felt something like that. Perhaps the diary left you something, some kind of connection... like the one he has with me. I can block him now, most of the time; you'd need to learn how."

After a long pause, Ginny looked at him with something like hope in her eyes. "I suppose that could be possible," she ventured. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Do you feel like someone's there all the time?" Harry asked.

"Not all the time. Do you know when it's best? When I play this," she said, patting the violin case. "Maybe he doesn't like my music."

Harry smiled. "He has poor taste, then – just like Ron."

Ginny looked away, in a shy gesture that would have been commonplace for her just a few weeks earlier. "You... you like it when I play?"

"You're very good," Harry said. "At least, I think so. I suppose I don't really know anything, but it certainly sounds very good to me."

Ginny stood up, and walked to the front door. She strolled outside and sat down on the public bench in front of the Quibbler, along the High Street. She took out her violin, and began to play. Harry picked up the letter and the note from the shop floor, and put them in his saddlebags. He took out Ron's bag and then Ginny and Hermione's things, enlarged them, and left them near the door before he joined Ginny outside. Her playing became more and more energetic. Passers-by slowed to watch and listen. Harry sat beside her. When

she finished whatever piece she had called from her memory, a half dozen onlookers applauded.

“See? You must be very good,” Harry said.

“It’s amazing, Harry. It feels so good to play,” Ginny said. “It’s as if I were meant to do it, somehow. When I start, I really don’t want to stop.”

“Then don’t stop,” Harry encouraged her.

She looked at the violin, and then at Harry, and sighed. “When I play, I feel like... like maybe I’m who I was meant to be... finally. I understand what it must be like for you, to be the Boy-Who-Lived. Do you know why I have so few friends? Do you know that Hermione was the only Gryffindor girl who talked to me for almost a year? Do you know that you’re not the only one who screams in the night? I’m the Girl-Who-Was-Possessed, Harry.”

“I suppose that I don’t really know you,” Harry admitted. “I should fix that, you know? Look... you should talk about this with Dumbledore. Even if you were the way in, there may be a solution.”

Ginny nodded vigorously. “I’ll Owl him. I promise.”

Harry stood, and so did she. She hugged him tightly; he wished it felt a little more sisterly. “Thank you,” she said softly in his ear. “Thank you for not quitting on me.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you. It’s not just Ron and Hermione and me anymore,” Harry said. “It’s all of us now – you, and Luna, and Neville too. The trip to the Ministry sealed it, I think – we’re all together now, whatever may come.” He gently disengaged. “I’ll see you in the fall,” he said, and headed to the Bonneville. He felt her watching him, but no one else paid him any mind as he rode slowly toward the carriageway that led north.

* * * * *

St. Ebb was completely overrun with automobiles and tourists on foot. It wasn't at all what Harry had expected of a small fishing village. Harry had to carefully weave and dodge, as he made his way through. The High Street ran for just a few blocks; it faced the sea, like everything else in the village. The tourists looked at him with curiosity, or unmasked lust for his motorbike in a case or two. The few people who looked to be local watched him with expressions that ranged from disinterest to scorn. He rushed into a haberdashery, purchased a few sundries, and sought some general directions. As he described the tower house, the tone of the elderly proprietor shifted from tolerant to unpleasant. Harry figured that the man was fed up with tourists – he had heard at least half a dozen ridiculous questions while standing on line. He listened carefully to the directions – the proprietor's brogue was thick and harsh, and he seemed in a hurry to show Harry out.

Half a mile beyond the village, a girl walking along the edge of the roadway stopped and watched him pass. She looked to be about his age, he thought, with longish dark hair and bright eyes. She had a nice shape and a pleasant face, he decided - a pleasant and somehow familiar face. Her expression was one of puzzlement, almost surprise. As he passed, he began to believe that she might have been one of the watchers back in the shop district. She couldn't possibly have walked that far that quickly, he thought. He sped up, and paid close attention to his surroundings. He rode in a wide circle along different country lanes for half an hour, until he was satisfied that he wasn't being followed.

A rutted lane joined the carriageway about five miles south of St. Ebb, which ran for the better part of a mile toward the sea. The trees that lined the lane at uneven intervals were the only visible foliage larger than a bush. The tower house was poised at the end of the lane. It stood fully five stories high, in an "L" shape. The roof was steeply pitched and adorned with turrets. The property formed a high promontory. From the drive in front of the entry, Harry could look left and see St. Ebb in the distance. Bercliffe was apparently a place name and little more; he couldn't see a single substantial structure between the tower and the village. Ahead and to the right, he could look down toward the low cliffs and the sea below. At last he understood what Sirius meant about the stacks. Two rock spires,

carved by the twin forces of wind and water, erupted from the water a quarter-mile apart.

At least, Harry found an entryway that breached the wall around the tower. Harry stood there for quite some time, keys in hand. The massive oaken door was painted black. It had the same silver serpent knocker as the house on Grimmauld Place. The stone trim that framed the door was carved to resemble intertwined snakes. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was exchanging one prison for another, however well appointed. He fished out the scrap of parchment with the directions to the bothy, and looked toward the southernmost of the two stacks. In a moment, he could make out a low log-and-stone structure with a reddish roof that stood near the cliffs. He looked around cautiously before he reduced the Bonneville, settled it inside one of the saddlebags, and set off toward the bothy.

The heights of the promontory appeared flat from the tower house, but were in fact rolling. He followed a low stone wall, pierced here and there by wooden posts that bore an electric line. As he drew closer, he crossed muddy ruts that led from the lane toward the bothy. They were deep grooves, from a good-sized vehicle. A hundred feet from the front door, Harry felt a familiar energy brush past him; he immediately recognised the sensation as having come from a ward. He saw haphazard stacks of rocks and stones here and there, and understood Sirius' admonition that they should be left alone. It looked as though the wards were positioned to provide an ample private yard. He tried all three keys before successfully opening the door.

Harry walked into an open living space that appeared to take up half the structure. A compact kitchen dominated the far side of the space. To the right, the entire wall was taken up with loaded shelves. There was a wood stove in the centre. A settee, two chairs and a low table sat between the stove and the wall with the shelves. A dining table with four chairs sat opposite the stove. To the left, a narrow hall led past a bath with water closet and a small mechanical space to a bedroom. A very large bed overpowered the modest bedroom. There was barely room for a small writing desk and an armoire. A hatch in the bedroom ceiling opened to reveal a sliding ladder. A very clean and mostly empty attic ran the length of the bothy. There were a few

boxes stacked in the far corner. The rooms were decorated in oranges and blues – they were clean but very dated, Harry thought.

A wax-sealed envelope sat on the small kitchen counter. Harry fumbled with it while he perused the wall of shelves. The shelves were filled with books and records. Harry assumed that the massive silver metal box labelled “Marantz” was a stereo, though he'd not seen one quite so large before. There was a phonograph atop the box. Large speakers hung in the corners of the room. His eyes ran past a heavy-looking box next to the wood stove, and he remembered to place his wand and the saddlebags inside. There was a single folded piece of parchment inside the envelope:

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August 3

Dear Mr. Potter:

Per Mr. Black's instructions, I have engaged some Muggles to assure that the secondary building is prepared for occupancy. Some necessities were replaced – I have no idea which or for what purpose. I cannot imagine why Mr. Black would have chosen to live in the manner of a Muggle, or why you might choose the same. However, he was most insistent in his instructions. As I am unable to see or even locate the building in question, I do hope that the Muggles performed adequately. I found their services excessively expensive and their manner quite rude.

In my opinion, the main house is a more satisfactory environment by any measure. At such time as you may decide, I will be happy to have this building leased to Muggles, outfitted for livestock, or dedicated to some other suitable purpose. You may owl me at your convenience, or I can be reached via Floo from the main house.

Respectfully,

Dedalus Diggle, Esq.

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“I don’t care for your attitude – not one bit,” Harry said aloud. There was no food to speak of; he made a mental note to dash back into the village. He turned to the shelves again, and began to read book spines and record jackets. There was a milk crate set on the shelf beneath the phonograph, which held an assortment of records. He recognised two of the records from Uncle Vernon’s modest collection: one by the Beatles and another by the Bee Gees. He carefully put the Beatles album onto the phonograph’s spindle, lowered the tone arm, and experimented with the silver stereo until music poured from the speakers.

It took Harry a while to figure out how to enlarge his trunks and boxes. Ultimately, he had to do it outside the wards and drag them back to the bothy. By the time he had listened to both sides of Yellow Submarine, he had managed to hang his two punching bags from an exposed beam, and had set up his weights. He made it through two songs from the Bee Gee’s album, before deciding that they were nearly as screechy as the Weird Sisters.

He thumbed through the records in the milk crate. To Harry, the records were another example of how little he really knew about Sirius. He imagined Sirius sitting in that very room, listening to the Beatles whilst writing with a quill on parchment. Harry was unfamiliar with most of the names on the jackets – Talking Heads, Steppenwolf, Peaches and Herb, Billy Joel, Blondie, Peter Gabriel, Rod Stewart. One record was by The Police, who Harry had at least heard of. The name Jimi Hendrix was vaguely familiar to him, as was Pink Floyd.

The last record was entitled Can’t Get Enough, by a very large man with long thick hair called Barry White. The song titles seemed dubious to Harry – “love” seemed to be in every one of them. Curious, he put the record on the phonograph and proceeded to unpack his trunk. The singer had a terribly deep voice, and at one point in the second track he stopped singing and began to talk suggestively. Harry listened to the words for a moment, and felt himself blushing. It was obvious what Barry White couldn’t get enough of, and both the jacket and the record were quite well worn. Harry thought back to Sirius’ letter – “lusting after Muggle women”, he had said. Whitehorn did say he would have a woman on each arm, Harry thought, and

what did Remus call this place – a ‘pad’? The thought of a young Sirius shagging to the sounds of Barry White left Harry rolling on the floor with laughter.

When he recovered, he took the Barry White record off the phonograph, and stuffed it randomly onto one of the shelves. He replaced it with the record by Steppenwolf – it seemed appropriate to listen to a wolf, he thought. Unlike the previous record, Harry had absolutely no trouble at all imagining Sirius listening to “Born to Be Wild” at maximum volume. In fact, he had difficulty getting the song out of his head all the way back to St. Ebb. He picked up a few sundries and some perishables, and quickly returned to the bothy.

Harry ate and listened to two more records. He finished unpacking and put away his remaining personal effects. He went through the stretching routine that Dudley had taught him, and progressively worked away the stiffness that came from several hours on the Bonneville. From there, he moved into a light free-weight routine. Instead of calming him, the work brought his mind squarely back to the events of the last several days. By the end of the routine, he was more than ready for the bags.

He put on the elastic hand wraps, and pulled on his boxing gloves. He worked the speed bag for a long while, just as Dudley had shown him. He felt raw, as though the slightest scratch would bring forth waves of frustration and rage. He switched to the heavy bag, hitting it hard.

Pound. Why does everyone have to be hurt because of me? Pound-pound. Some friend I am. Pound-pound-pound. If I were a real friend, I would have stayed to help the Weasleys. Pound-pound. I drag poor Ron to the Ministry, and he comes home with nightmares and a death wish. He couldn’t think of the Ministry without seeing Bellatrix Lestrange, and now he couldn’t think about Bellatrix Lestrange without seeing Luna. Who would have guessed she was that strong? Pound-pound-pound.

He saw Hermione, promising to protect the prophecy and then screaming in agony. I hurt everyone that I love – everyone! I hope her father listened to me. They should go away, as far away as they can.

Pound-pound-pound-pound. Even the Aurors were frightened of him, he remembered. They should all be afraid. It's dangerous to be close to me. Pound-pound. If the Death Eaters don't get you, maybe I will. Pound-pound-pound. I might tear you apart with my bare hands. Pound-pound. I can't love anyone. Pound-pound-pound. Even if it was safe, I don't know how. Pound-pound. Hermione had a point – what if this has something to do with how I might kill Voldemort? Pound-pound-pound. I have to control it! Pound-pound-POUND-pound-pound. Dumbledore must know what's happening to me. Pound-POUND-pound-pound. He's just not telling me. Pound-pound-POUND. If he knows I'm going to die, I wish he'd just tell me. Pound-pound-pound. He can't know that. Pound-pound. Luna was right – she has to be right. Pound-pound-pound. We choose our fate. Pound-POUND-POUND. I choose to live! POUND-POUND.

He saw Dumbledore, fending off Voldemort at the Ministry. He knew that Dumbledore was the key, whether he liked it or not. Dumbledore has to show me how – he must know! POUND-pound-pound. I'm going to kill Voldemort. POUND-POUND-POUND. I'll show Dumbledore. POUND-pound-pound-pound. I'll show all of them. POUND-pound. I'll kill Voldemort and Wormtail and Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange and every last one of them, if I have to. POUND-POUND-POUND. Nothing else matters now. POUND-pound-pound. I have two years to learn it all, everything I need. POUND-pound-pound-POUND. I can figure out love and friends and life later. POUND-pound-pound. Sirius lived without love for twelve years, and he was a hound. POUND-POUND-pound. Remus has been alone for most of his life. POUND-pound-pound-POUND. Dumbledore's probably been alone for a hundred years. Pound-POUND-pound-pound. If they could manage it, then so can I. Pound-pound-POUND. I can do this. Pound-pound. Damn it, I can do this. Pound. How am I going to do this? Pound. Who am I trying to fool? Pound. I don't want to be alone, not all the time.

Harry lowered his hands. He looked up at the ceiling, and shouted, "All right, Mum! All right, Dad! This is when you're supposed to magically appear and tell me what to do next! You're supposed to tell me that this is all going to work out somehow! You can come any time now – I'm waiting!"

He stripped off the boxing gloves, and threw them across the room. "Come on, Sirius! You wanted to be my guardian! Tell me what to do! Where do I start?" He waited. No apparitions appeared, no ghostly presences, no voices – nothing at all. He hadn't expected any, but would have welcomed them just the same.

He went into the bedroom. He had hung the framed picture of Hermione next to the armoire. "You'd tell me what to do," he said to the picture, "but I probably wouldn't like it." Hermione's presence had been the greatest certainty in his life for five years. Now everything felt as though it were falling apart around him. He wondered whether there were any certainties left.

Harry tried to sleep for some time, but sleep wouldn't come. It wasn't that the bed was uncomfortable, or that the room was stuffy. He got up from the bed, took Hermione's picture off the wall, and set it face-down atop the armoire. I'm sorry, but I need you out of my head for a while, he thought. That left Ginny and Luna, much to Harry's chagrin. Thinking about Ginny made him nervous and left him unsettled, and thinking about Luna made him sad and left him upset.

He sat up in the bed, and clutched his knees to his chest. "I need a little Muggleness in my life," he said aloud. He grabbed his pillow and a throw, and carried them to the living area. He put a stack of Sirius' records on the phonograph, curled up on the settee under the throw, and just listened. He found himself thinking about the girl with the dark hair at the edge of the village, and he wondered if she was in fact a Muggle. He wondered what she might be doing – whether she was sleeping – and wondered what she liked and disliked, and who her friends were, and what hope and dreams she might have. He imagined that all of it might be fairly mundane, and he decided that mundane likes, dislikes, hopes and dreams sounded very pleasant indeed. Thoughts of perfectly ordinary aspirations led him into sleep now and again, until the sky had lightened from black to midnight blue.

Harry rubbed at his bleary eyes and slipped on his trainers. He looked around the living area. It wasn't perfect, but it felt right. He'd had places to live, to be sure – the Dursleys' house, Grimmauld Place, the Burrow from time to time, Hogwarts. Hogwarts had been home to

him, but that felt broken now in some fashion. The bothy just felt right, he decided.

He walked briskly toward the cliffs. There was a narrow switchback that led him to the expanse of beach below. He stretched his legs, and then began to run back and forth along the beach. He hadn't run in nine days, and it felt good. The sky continued to lighten, until it matched the dusky blue of the rolling sea. A thin line of darkness split the sea and the sky, shifting from midnight blue to brownish to deep red to crimson. A growing spectrum of oranges and yellows emerged between the blue sky and the crimson dividing line. Harry stopped running, and watched.

A single point in the crimson line grew brighter and brighter, and Harry was sure that the sun would emerge in that very spot – it was certain, he knew. He was afraid to blink for fear that he would miss the moment, but it lagged as though the sea was unwilling to give up the sun to the sky. Just as the bright spot in the crimson and orange line turned to blinding white, a thin green line burst along the whole of the horizon – and then it was gone, and the sun had arrived. The sun overcame the green flash and banished the night. He drank in the salt air and felt the burnt orange glow of the morning sun on his face. He felt the breeze ripple his shirt, and he listened to the churning of the water.

The cold tide rushed over his feet. He was awash in certainties – the power of the wind and the water, the daily victory of light over dark. A more personal certainty broke through the surface, and he smiled. He closed his eyes and gave it voice, with two words offered up to the sky.

“I'm home.”